

Adult development (vertical) theory

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Constructive-developmental [also referred to as vertical development] theory is a stage theory of adult development that focuses on the growth and elaboration of a person's ways of understanding the self and the world.

The term “constructive-developmental” was first suggested by Bob Kegan (1980) to refer to a stream of work in psychology that focuses on the development of meaning and meaning-making processes across the lifespan. The theory is “constructive” in the sense that it deals with a person's construals, constructions, and interpretations of experience, that is, the meaning a person makes of experience. It is “developmental” in the sense that it is concerned with how those construals, constructions, and interpretations of experience grow more complex over time. Constructive-developmental theory thus takes as its subject the growth and elaboration of a person's ways of understanding the self and the world. It assumes an ongoing process of development in which qualitatively different meaning systems evolve over time, both as a natural unfolding as well as in response to the limitations of existing ways of making meaning. Each meaning system is more complex than the previous one in the sense that it is capable of including, differentiating among, and integrating a more diverse range of experience.

Constructive-developmental theory is built on the seminal work of Jean Piaget (1954), which he referred to as “genetic epistemology”—the genesis or successive unfolding of the capacity for rational thought in the developing child. For Piaget, development was not a gradual accumulation of new knowledge, but a process of moving through qualitatively distinct stages of growth, a process that transforms knowledge itself. As a constructivist, Piaget believed that categories of thought—such as number, space, time, and quantity—are not given a priori, but are actively constructed by the individual in response to the need to understand the world. When contradictions arise in individuals' current ways of constructing the world (as, in a famous experiment, when a child learns that the volume of water in two differently shaped containers is actually the same in each), they reconstruct how they understand the world to eliminate the contradiction.

The basic propositions of constructive-developmental theory are the following:

1. People actively construct ways of understanding and making sense of themselves and the world (as opposed to “taking in” an objective world).

2. There are identifiable patterns of meaning-making that people share in common with one another; these are variously referred to as stages, orders of consciousness, ways of knowing, levels of development, organizing principles, or (in this article) orders of development.
3. Orders of development unfold in a specific invariant sequence, with each successive order transcending and including the previous order.
4. In general, people do not regress; once an order of development has been constructed, the previous order loses its organizing function, but remains as a perspective that can now be reflected upon.
5. Because subsequent orders include all earlier orders as special cases, later orders are more complex (they support more comprehensive understanding) than earlier orders; later orders are not better in any absolute sense.
6. Developmental movement from one order to the next is driven by limitations in the current way of constructing meaning; this can happen when a person faces increased complexity in the environment that requires a more complex way of understanding themselves and the world.
7. People's order of development influences what they notice or can become aware of, and therefore, what they can describe, reflect on, and change.

Constructive-developmental theory concerns itself with two primary aspects of development: (a) the organizing principles that regulate how people make sense of themselves and the world (*orders of development*) and (b) how these regulative principles are constructed and re-constructed over time (*developmental movement*). An organizing principle itself is subjective, because the person is subject to its capacity to make meaning; it cannot be reflected on itself, since it is the regulative means by which the person engages in reflection. Developmental movement involves the person's gradually increasing awareness of his or her current subjective organizing principle until the person is able to reflect on the organizing principle itself, at which point what was subjective becomes objective. Of course, there will then be a new organizing principle to which the person is subject. When operating from this new principle, which takes the former principle as an object of reflection, a person is capable of differentiating and integrating more complex life experiences.

Developmental movement is driven by new challenges that reveal the limitations of the current organizing principle. An order of development is a complex interaction between the individual's meaning-making capability and the holding environment, which is the totality of the surrounding and embedding social and interpersonal world of love, family, work, and play. The holding environment may confirm and support a person's current order of development or disconfirm and challenge it. Developmental movement is thus conceived as an interaction between the achievement of stability and order through making meaning of the holding environment and the challenge of new environments with new relations and roles that reveal the limitations of that achievement.

Bill Drath (2001) proposes three generalized ways of understanding and recognizing leadership, based on the Bob Kegan's three adult orders of development. Hypotheses about differing implicit theories of leadership can be derived from his framework. *Dependent* individuals—because they look to important others to gain a sense of themselves—are more likely to expect a formal leader to personally create direction, inspire commitment, and deal with challenges the group encounters. *Independent* individuals—because they are self-governing and self-defining—expect a formal leader to interact with them as autonomous individuals, reasoning and negotiating with them to set direction and gain their commitment, and providing help when needed to deal with challenges the group encounters. *Inter-independent* individuals—because they see themselves as continuously recreating themselves in interaction with their environment—expect a formal leader to create conditions that allow groups of people to find a shared direction that they become jointly committed to and that encourage them to deal collectively with their challenges.

Bill Torbert and associates' early work (Fisher, Merron, & Torbert, 1987; Torbert, 1987) applied Jane Loevinger's framework and the WUSCT to the context of managerial work. However, as this work evolved, Torbert developed his own framework more applicable to organizational contexts. Susanne Cook-Grueter worked with Torbert to evolve the WUSCT in ways consistent with the new framework, including more rigorous definition and measurement of later stages (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Torbert & Associates, 2004). The latest version of this customization of the WUSCT is now called the Leadership Development Profile (LDP).

Bill Torbert's framework is a seven-stage model with each stage representing an "action logic," that is, an overall strategy that thoroughly informs an individual's reasoning and behavior (Torbert & Associates, 2004).

Seven Transformations (Action Logics) of Adulthood: Growing “Up”



Alchemical – Integrates material, spiritual, and societal transformations

Transforming – Generates organizational and personal transformations

Redefining – Reframes complex problems in unique ways

Achiever – Driven by personal and team achievement

Expert – Focuses on logic and expertise

Diplomat – Wants to belong and fit in

Opportunist – Wins for self in any way possible

Rooke, D., & Torbert, W. R. (2005, April). **Seven transformations of leadership**. Harvard Business Review, 66–77.

The first stage, Opportunist, is prior to any orders we are describing here. The next six stages represent three pairs of stages which can be organized into the broad developmental orders of Dependent, Independent, and Inter-independent. The second stage in each pair is portrayed as a transitional stage in moving toward the next order. Individuals at different stages organize their experiences in terms of a particular logic (e.g., norms, craft logic, system effectiveness) with the logics becoming more complex as individuals develop. The logics shape a main focus of attention at each stage. An individual's focus broadens with each successive stage.



Bill Torbert’s framework has been used to understand various aspects of managerial behavior and organizational change. Four propositions have been central to this work: (a) An individual’s order of development influences his or her approach to managerial tasks; (b) Leaders at later orders of development are more effective at leading transformative change; (c) Developmental movement is facilitated by action inquiry; and (d) Organization development can be understood from a constructive-developmental theory perspective.

Torbert and colleagues (Fisher & Torbert, 1991; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Torbert & Associates, 2004) argue that the logic of the Inter-independent order (Strategist) is especially relevant for leading transformative organizational change—changes that focus on whole-system improvement and that require fundamentally changing the culture, practices, and underlying assumptions of the organization. Only when leaders reach the Inter-independent order are they open to the possibility of rethinking and altering their assumptions and purposes (i.e., can engage in double-loop learning, Argyris & Schön, 1978). This is in contrast to the Independent order with its emphasis on executing rationally related steps from presenting problem to solution. They also argue that Inter-independent leaders believe that change requires new shared understandings discovered through mutual exploration of differences among organizational members, whereas Independent leaders believe that change requires single-framed hierarchical guidance. They conclude that it is only power exercised in a mutuality-enhancing, empowering manner that can generate wholehearted

transformation rather than conformity or compliance; and that this type of power is most often exercised by the Inter-independent leader. Weathersby (1993) found some support for this argument. She examined essays written by managers about their leadership models. Managers at later stages put more emphasis on the leader's role as an agent of cultural change.

A more direct test of this hypothesis was undertaken by David Rooke and Bill Torbert (1998). They examined ten longitudinal organization change efforts. Seven of these efforts resulted in transformative change and three did not. Of the seven successful efforts, five were led by CEOs measured at the Inter-independent order and two were led by CEOs measured at the Independent order. All three unsuccessful efforts were led by CEOs measured at the Independent or Dependent order. The correlation between CEO development order and degree of transformative organizational change was significant.

However, Torbert and Associates (2004) also advocate for an additional developmental practice: action inquiry. Action inquiry is a disciplined practice of integrating action and inquiry in the present moment that helps individuals, groups, and organizations become more capable of self-development. In a given situation, a person engaged in action inquiry is doing several things at once, including paying attention to the developing situation, accomplishing tasks as they are prioritized, and revising the tasks or actions as needed. Action inquiry requires people to carefully attend to three types of data: internal subjective data (first-person data), data generated in interaction with others (second-person data), and external objective data (third-person data) in an effort to learn from experiences. Action inquiry is expected to increase the likelihood that individuals will notice and come to understand the limits of their current meaning structure.

Finally, it is important to note that developmental theory is evolving toward a more holistic, integrative perspective that views individual development as one facet of a developing system.

Ken Wilber's notion of "integral theory" (2000b) is one of the most well-developed models reflecting this perspective. Integral theory is not a single theory; rather it is a comprehensive model attempting to coordinate numerous theories that describe development. The model looks at four domains of reality: the internal self, the external self, the internal collective, and the external collective. In the model, developmental movement through similar developmental orders characterize each domain, and this movement is interconnected across domains. In the integral model, development cannot be understood from the perspective of one domain; instead, an all-domain, multiple-order perspective needs to be invoked.

This perspective fits well with recent applications of constructive-developmental theory to leadership in which the development of individuals and of the collective are seen as interrelated (Drath & Palus, 1994; Torbert & Associates, 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Integral theory points to a potential new domain of leadership research: *research on the*

development of social systems that produce leadership (not just on the development of individuals who are part of these systems), addressing such questions as: Do the shared meaning-making structures of groups, teams, and whole organizations move through developmental orders similar to those observed in individuals (as Torbert suggests)? What do leadership processes look like at different orders of collective development? What stimulates the developmental movement of leadership processes in a collective? How does the mix of individual developmental orders within a collective impact the leadership processes of the collective?

Leadership is a complex social phenomenon. The effort to understand leadership and how it develops has accordingly called forth a wide array of concepts and theoretical approaches. Because it deals with an aspect of leadership that may be taken as basic—the generation and development of meaning for individuals and social systems—constructive-developmental theory has the potential to act as an integrative framework in the field. This potential can only be realized to the extent that theorists, researchers, and practitioners work in more interconnected ways to test and refine the propositions generated by applying this theory to leadership.

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