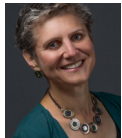


# The Case for Maturity



WRITTEN BY  
Jan Rybeck, MCC

**Vertical Development is about expanding and deepening our capacity to see, understand, empathize, and respond in a diversity of situations. As we grow and evolve in this way, our experience of self, others, and the world shifts, leading to new ways of doing and being, that in turn lead to other changes that we cannot always foresee.**

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“I have always succeeded .... I am terrified that in this new role I will fail,” she confessed, 30 minutes into our first meeting together. Newly promoted to a SVP role and considered one of the highest of the high potentials, my client was already burning herself out with late nights, unrealistic expectations, and brutal second guessing and criticism of her own performance. One look at her 360 results and it was clear she was not only quite competent at what she did but others thought so too, making her competence doubly apparent. “Tell me what I need to develop to succeed in this job”, she said, pulling out the development planner stapled to the last page of her 360 report.

“You’ve already got all the competence you need to do this job,” I assured her. “It’s not competence we need to work on... its maturity.” “Are you suggesting that I am immature?”, my client asked, slightly amused. “Hardly,” I answered. “Maturity is the capacity to understand and work with different ideas, personalities, and situations without reverting to doing things the same way and with the same frame of mind.”

“Truth is, when it comes to dealing with the complexity and uncertainty that happens at your level, you need to expand your capacity to navigate many right answers to find the appropriate response; consider multiple points of view to build buy in, and make well-vetted decisions; manage dilemmas made of equally valid yet opposing factors; and present yourself with humility and confidence, clarity and caring, in order to get others on board.”

“The bumper sticker here is find the right path AND make the path right”, I added. “How on earth do I do that?” my client responded. “I have been successful because of how hard I work to get the answer right. Making the path right sounds like a cop-out to me. It’s either right or not.” “No wonder you are afraid of failing in this bigger role,” I said. “If you are using the same idea of success in this new job as you were when you were leading technical teams, you will likely feel like a failure several times a day. What if success were not about being right?”

My client gave this some thought. “If success were not about being right, I would have no idea whether things were working or not. Perhaps I would need to find other ways to assess whether we were on the mark. I guess I would need to consider whether we were effective. Maybe being right is not as important as being effective, and to be effective, I would need to do a better job of finding out if we were effective at different places along the line, which sounds kind of like what you were saying, you know, about making the path right.”

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Noticing that my client’s pace had slowed down, as if she were releasing the clutch on one way of being and shifting into a new gear, I asked, “If your success were less about being right and more about being effective, what would change for you?” “I would feel less central to the success, it would not be about me. And that would be ok, not easy, but ok.” “What would not be easy about it?” I asked. “My whole identity, since I was a kid, was about being the one with the answers.” “ Sounds like this might be an invitation to see yourself in a different way.” I interjected. “Yeah, I am not sure how I see myself now, but just thinking about it this way, I feel lighter, less burdened, and freed up to consider the possibilities I could not see before. Maybe also to ask for help more and get others involved so it is not all about me. So what do I need to do to get this maturity thing right?” she asked with a smirk.

Mature leaders demonstrate both gravitas and agility. Ask any leader you admire about their most formative learning, and they will likely tell you about experiences ... and not necessarily the good ones. Ask them what enabled them to learn from those experiences, and you hear things like, “I changed my perspective,” “I got to walk in their shoes,” “I know what it is like to be in the trenches,” “I hit bottom and bounced back,” “I realized it was not about me,” “I was humbled over and over again

till I was ready to ask for help.”

Mature leaders do not need to have a lot of “time on planet” to qualify, but that they fully learn from the time they have invested, expanding their awareness, building their understanding, and allowing themselves to be changed and grown through their experiences. Good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment. Similarly, maturity comes from seeking, practicing, failing/ succeeding, learning from all of it, and adopting the learning into new ways of both being and experiencing the world & others.

Another way to think of maturity in leadership is as the capacity to comprehend and work with complexity that comes with multiple and often conflicting demands, personalities, and system dynamics. IBM’s 2010 study, *Capitalizing on Complexity: Insights from the Global Chief Executive Officer Study* identified complexity as the number one challenge facing business leaders. A similar study, conducted by Korn Ferry, found that the ability to work across multiple perspectives, cultures, and ambiguous realities is one of the top development opportunities for executives.

The term VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity), originally coined by the military, now brings up almost half a million references on Google and is the topic of hundreds of business articles. Perhaps that is why Nick Petrie of the Center for Creative Leadership has identified Vertical Development as the number one trend in Leadership Development.

Maturity and the vertical path of development that can get us there offer much needed advantage. In the same way as hiking up a mountain offers increasing degrees of perspective while also providing a grounded appreciation of the terrain involved, maturing as a leader provides both an expanded perspective of options, opportunities, and dynamics mixed with deep knowing and empathy for what is real.



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Imagine the complexity and uncertainty of a steep, foggy mountain climb under the leadership of someone without hiking experience and without the willingness to consider alternative routes and solutions when the going gets rough. Vertical Development models help us increase our capacity to understand, consider, and work with complexity. Just as experiences moving to new environments enable us to navigate the confusion about what to pack, what to ask, and how to embrace the range of emotions from loss to fear to excitement that come with a move, each stage provides increased access to mental, emotional, relational capacity.

- Petrie, like many others who study this topic, distinguishes between Horizontal Development — often the bread and butter of leadership development programs — and Vertical Development—what is often sorely lacking in these programs — largely because it's not something that can be taught in a workshop. More on these distinctions can be found in his article on the How To of Vertical Development (<http://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/verticalLeadersPart2.pdf>).

- Horizontal Development comes through attaining knowledge, skills, and behaviors that enable us to become more capable at what we do. We become more competent within a specific way of seeing the world and ourselves in it.

- Vertical Development increases our capacity to hold, comprehend, empathize, and respond to a range of attitudes, perspectives, emotions, and agendas.

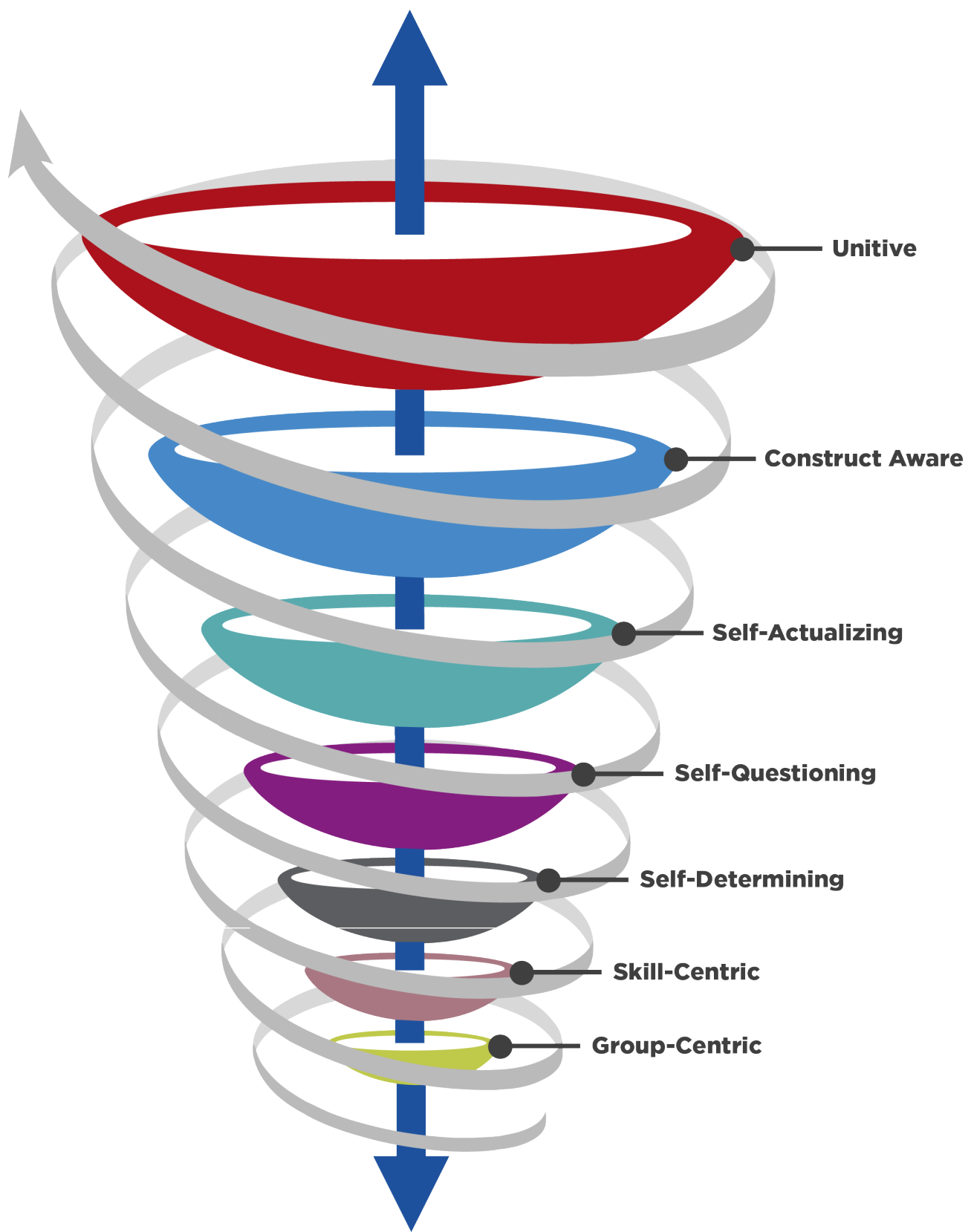
Both Horizontal and Vertical Development shape how we evolve. Susanne Cook-Greuter, thought leader and researcher in the field of Adult Development, uses a spiral to capture the dynamic quality of how development requires both horizontal and vertical elements. Several models for Vertical development, also known as Adult Stage Development and Ego Construct Development, offer different names for the stages we traverse and transcend as we evolve in this way. The spiral graphic to

the right describes the Leadership Maturity Framework with stage names used by Susanne Cook-Greuter. The second article in this series, Vertical Development: The Map and the Territory provides more detailed on the stages of development. (See graphic on pg. 5)

We never evolve purely vertically to the next stage. Rather— the application of knowledge, skills, and behaviors (Horizontal Development) and the emotional, physical, and relational, and systemic shifts that both enable and result from those changes leads to shifts in how we see ourselves (Vertical Development). As we change and expand the way we see ourselves and respond to our world, we integrate the skills and behaviors of earlier stages so we can access those capabilities when needed.

My SVP client, for example, realized that she needed to get better at delegation in order to build team capacity as well as free her up to do the strategic work only she could do. She practiced tools she learned in Crucial Conversations and Crucial Accountability workshops offered by VitalSmarts to develop those skills (Horizontal Development) and, as she became more effective at delegating, she experienced herself differently; less overwhelmed with putting out fires...and more able to reflect on strategic relationships and on how to manage dynamics at the top. She noticed—and in turn, began to embody—a slower, more effective and responsive manner with others. That led to her team looking to her for a new level of guidance. Still authentic to her nature, she demonstrated an uncommonly grounded understanding of the many systems at play and willingness to consider multiple factors before making decisions, hence she and others had more confidence in her direction. And she began to see her self, others, and the opportunities and challenges from different perspectives, which allowed for more options for response and solutions.

This is what is meant by maturing as a leader... increasing capacity to handle what comes at you without getting



stuck in rote ways of thinking and doing that limit what is possible. Though neither fast nor easy, the vertical path of development offers a dimension that includes and goes beyond behavior change to include the mental, emotional, relational, and systemic shifts that enable this increased capacity.

The next article in this series provides a map of the stages that speak to this path of increasing capacity, along with specific suggestions for coaching and developing at each stage.

\*The client examples provided in this article come from a composite of client experiences.



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Jan Rybeck leads the Mission Enablement practice for Digital Mobilizations, a leading edge Enterprise Engineering firm.

[Jrybeck@digitalmobilizations.com](mailto:Jrybeck@digitalmobilizations.com)

