

CONSTRUCTIVE DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Robert Kegan, a Harvard University professor of adult learning and professional development, has a theory of the stages of maturity that we find powerful and inspiring. Kegan's theoretical perspective has proved to be especially useful when applied to the character development needed by leaders, and has added depth to our own work. Called Constructive Development Theory, it is a model of adult development based on the idea that human beings naturally progress over a lifetime through as many as five distinct stages.ⁱ

At the first order of consciousness, or stage one, the very young child has not yet formulated the idea of a permanent, separate self. The person at stage two is typically a child or young adolescent who understands being differentiated from others, but still pursues mainly selfish goals. At stage two a person can't take the perspective of another, and is driven only by his or her own needs.

Stage three development should come in late adolescence or early adulthood – though it sometimes doesn't, causing major problems. People at stage three are fully socialized adults, who look to others – the community, family, the organization – as sources of values and self worth. They recognize that others have different points of view, and can empathize with others. But they are enmeshed in the roles and relationships around them, and tend to avoid conflict for fear that it will lead to the loss of esteem either for themselves or for others.

With growth to stage four, individuals have developed a value system that is truly theirs – a strong, individualized point of view that is self-authored. They have mastered an important skill of balance: they can see and empathize with others, but they can do this from an outside perspective. They have developed their views about the world, and recognize their own power in having done so. Individuals at stage four are responsible in the truest sense – they understand the power they have to create their own feelings and responses. They understand the source of their own and others' values. They are much better able to deal with conflict, since they aren't dependent on others for their self-esteem. They are, at this stage, able to commit to an institution or organization without being engulfed or overwhelmed by it; they can be a part of a group without being dependent on it. They can move beyond self-blame and blaming others to claim the power they have to step outside themselves, observe the situation, and be a force for change in it. They are the authors of their own lives.

At stage five, which many of us don't reach, people can even see the limits of their own value systems. As leaders, people at stage five are most open to ambiguities, most able to perceive and hold polarities in tension, and most concerned with larger systems – not just

the corporation, but also the country, or the world. They are most able to focus on the whole. At stage four an individual has developed a strong, resilient, self-aware ego; at stage five she or he has developed the humility and the expanded consciousness to move beyond ego.

Keganⁱⁱ and others have collected data over the years on the developmental stage of thousands of adults. The data shows that most adults, even those in professional or leadership positions in organizations, are primarily at stage three or between stages three and four, not at stage four or five.

Karl Kuhnert, a professor of psychology at the University of Georgia and senior research associate at Turknett Leadership Group, and his colleague Keith Eigel report research finding that board-elected CEOs and presidents of successful public firms with over \$1 billion in revenue are at higher levels of development than those in lower levels or in management at less successful firms.ⁱⁱⁱ At the most successful firms, leaders were only at levels four and five.

Forward growth to the next level is generally understood to be spurred by critical events, or, as Kuhnert and Eigel put it, “experiences that challenge and contradict our current ways of understanding ourselves, others, and our situations.” We believe that such transitions can be accelerated through intentional feedback, challenges to established patterns of thinking, and support. Working with our executive clients, we find that people can be brought to recognize the limitations of their stage two or three thinking and behavior, and with their new awareness and much work, purposefully make a shift to the next level of leadership.

ⁱ Kegan, Robert. *In Over Our Heads*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994.

ⁱⁱ Kegan, 1994.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kuhnert & Eigel, *Academy of Management Executive* article in press.