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a leader's guide to
**vertical
development**





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“In times of change, the learners will inherit the future while the learned will be perfectly equipped for a reality that no longer exists.”

– Eric Hoffer



It's no longer enough to be good at what you do.

While skill and competence still matter, the rate and level of disruption today demands the capacity to adapt, and to meet opportunities with a greater range of mindsets and behaviors.

When we talk with organizational stakeholders today, they tell us they need particular traits, not just in leaders but in contributors at every level. These include:

- Capacity to deal with ambiguous, uncertain, and complex challenges.
- Awareness of and ability to tap diversity in backgrounds and perspectives.
- Resilience and responsiveness to be effective no matter the stress and demands.

These are not skills or knowledge that can be learned in a classroom or webinar. They are capacities that come from building emotional, intellectual, and even physical and spiritual awareness, and abilities to be with and respond effectively to challenge, change, and uncertainty.

The truth is that disruption is a feature, not a bug, in both work and life today. This requires organizations and individuals to continually adapt and evolve. And while most leader development programs focus on behavior and skills, it's actually mindset—the way we think, believe, assume, feel, and physically attune—that shapes and drives behavior.

To build your capacity to adapt with continuous change, embrace diversity, handle complexity, and do it all without burning out, you need to grow your mindset.

Behavior Range vs Behavior Change

Imagine you are driving along in your jeep. You easily navigate the familiar terrain by driving the way you always drive. Suddenly the landscape gets rocky, the road disappears, and you need to traverse the unknown and diverse terrain—and you need to do it faster and in a way that doesn't freak out the folks bumping along in the back seat. This might be a good time to learn how to operate in a new gear, expand your range so you can adjust with the road, and do so without blowing your engine. You still have the option to operate in the familiar gears—that has not changed. Rather, you've grown your capacity, resulting in more range and a greater ability to adapt to what the journey ahead requires.

Over the past four decades, behavioral scientists have identified a predictable pattern in which adults tend to progress through stages of capacity. We each have the potential to grow through these stages by increasing our mindset and behavior range. Technically, the term for this pattern is Vertical Development, though in real life practice it is not a race to the top—as vertical might imply—but instead a journey of experimentation, experience, and deepening in awareness of self, others, and context.

This white paper offers:

- The three key principles of Vertical Leadership Development
- Snapshots of each mindset stage
- Self-coaching questions to consider to support your own development.



3 Principles of Vertical Development

Mindset stages are not just about how you think.

Mindsets include the beliefs, assumptions, emotions, fears, hopes, stories, and identity that both define and limit how you interact with the world. Pause for a moment and consider what is going on for you as you read this. What is your intent? What are the assumptions about what you are reading? How are you holding your body and what might that indicate about your mood, emotions, or attitude about all this? What hopes or fears are going on under the surface?

These are just some of the factors that contribute to mindset. It is a well understood phenomena that when we become more conscious of what is driving us, we can more appropriately respond, rather than react, to what comes at us. The act of growing mindset is one of waking up to our habits of thinking, feeling, and doing, identifying the ways we get in our own way, and how we might best respond given the situation at hand.



Vertical Development is not a race to the top.

Even though it is called vertical, higher on the developmental hierarchy is not necessarily better. Each stage has its challenges, and you need to do the work of earlier stages to transition into the next. Yes, later stages allow for greater range, but the simple truth is that you can't be where you are not yet. Each stage comes with its own strengths and challenges and involves profound shifts in how we experience ourselves, others, and situations, which means there is serious work to do and embody in each stage. So rather than push yourself to try to be more "evolved" or higher, we encourage the approach of holding stage lightly, while taking your growth seriously. Use the stages as a map, not a yardstick.

Transitions out of and into stages are not always fun, easy, or clear.

Because this stuff can go deep to challenging long-held beliefs about ourselves, others, life, and even identity, the shift out of one and into another mindset stage can come with a sense of loss or disorientation. It is quite common, for example, for a technical expert who advances to leading a team to feel at a loss when they realize that their hard-earned technical smarts are irrelevant when it comes to building a team. A high achieving professional may become lost when business outcomes no longer matter to them as much as finding fulfillment in what they do. Understanding the different mindset stages provides clear practices and paths that allow for stepping past what we know towards what is possible. And this clarity can be quite a comfort when experiencing the disorientation of mindset shifts.

As you read through the following snapshots of each mindset stage, consider the following questions:

- What challenges do you find yourself routinely stumbling up against? What is a pattern with those challenges?
- What is the mindset (beliefs, assumptions, hopes, fears, attitude, emotions, etc.) that are operating in those situations?
- What else might be possible?
- What might need to shift, that is within your control, to enable you to step into that possibility?

We recommend that as you read the following descriptions, you highlight the specific strengths, storylines, and watchouts that resonate for you. Hint: when you get to the mindset stage description that you struggle to understand or can't quite picture in action, you have likely stumbled onto the stage just beyond your own. This is neither good, nor bad... rather information to consider as you explore your own growth edge.

The Stages of Vertical Leadership Development

Opportunist

“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.”

Mindset Summarized

The Opportunist mindset is primarily focused on one’s personal needs, self-protection, and working the environment so they come out on top. In this way, individuals operating from an Opportunist mindset maintain for themselves an illusion of control. The work of this stage is often about tending to immediate needs for gratification and a perceived need for safety. Transitioning out of this mindset often comes with the realization that there can be safety in numbers and belonging, opening to the Diplomat mindset in which group loyalty and strict adherence to rules becomes central. This mindset is particularly useful when there is an actual immediate threat that demands singular focus on self protection.

Opportunist Mindset Stage at-a-Glance

Thoughts and Storyline

- Everyone is against me
- I can only count on myself
- Others are not to be trusted
- I must control it all
- I have no vulnerabilities

Strengths

- Self-protection
- Can be perceived as invincible to some
- Activating when under real threat to life
- Heightened sense of threat awareness
- Knack for seeing opportunity for own gain.

Blind Spots and Watch outs

- Manipulates others and situations
- Does not trust others
- Can lead others down paths that don’t serve them
- Reactively resorts to hostility, blaming others, and stereotyping
- Disregards laws, rules, needs and safety of others if they stand in the way of winning.

Stretch Exercises for Opportunist Mindset

- Hit bottom or come up against a situation such as major illness, job loss, or natural disaster, in which it is clear they cannot win or be safe unless they rely on or connect with others.
- Therapeutic or coaching support to distinguish between real and perceived threat.
- Relationships (work or personal) with others who can see through the need for control and manipulation and hold them accountable, by not enabling manipulative and self-centered behavior.

Coaching Questions

Self-coaching questions are of little use at this mindset stage as the belief they are right and everyone else is wrong leads to limited interest in asking for help.

Diplomat

“The rules are there to make sure things work as expected. They have served us well in the past so who am I to change them?”

Mindset Summarized

The Diplomat mindset relies on clear rules and norms and expects others to fall in line. Sometimes this looks like a hierarchical command and control approach or a highly structured environment in which it is important for reasons of safety, regulation, or politics that everyone follows the rules. Diplomat mindset prefers to follow and make things work as part of the group.

Entering into this mindset stage often comes with the realization that it can be advantageous to be part of the group. The work of consolidating in this mindset usually involves paying attention and deferring to the group norms and expectations and developing a strong loyalty to the larger entity and/or leader. Exiting this stage of mindset often comes with either a desire or opportunity to stand out and pursue interests or career opportunities outside the group or group focus.

Diplomat mindset is helpful in environments where rules must be followed and loyalty is key.

Diplomat Mindset Stage at-a-Glance

Thoughts and Storyline

- If I stand out or challenge the group, I will no longer have a place
- Conflict and differing opinions create more problems than they are worth
- Loyalty trumps new ideas
- Tried and true is what makes us successful
- If I am not part of the group, who am I?

Blind Spots and Watch outs

- Defer to the group over one's own experience
- Operate from fear of not fitting in
- Dependent on others for self-definition
- Conflict averse
- Limited to simple and superficial solutions

Strengths

- Loyal to the group and leadership
- Identifies with the group and brand
- Follows rules and consistent methods
- Will not rock the boat or create conflict
- Gravitates to tangible, concrete, obvious, and externally appealing solutions



Stretch Exercises for Diplomat Mindset

- Take a role or project that requires independent thinking outside the group.
- Talk to others in different roles and careers and to learn about what their job requires.
- Pay attention to how you feel and what you think to become more acquainted with what interests you.

Coaching Questions

- What interests you?
- In what ways does the group hold you back?
- What is it that makes the group worth sticking with?

Expert

“I need to do it myself if I want it done right.”

Mindset Summarized

The Expert mindset focuses on what you know and do. Competence and methodical, linear approaches with clear right and wrong answers are important with this stage of mindset.

Entering into this mindset stage often comes with a desire to develop an area of specialization or expertise. The work of this stage is to build confidence through going deep into an area and becoming skillful. This often involves an emphasis on details and credentials that mark and measure accomplishment. Transitioning out of this stage often comes with the realization that it may not be enough to be right, smart, efficient and to achieve goals you may need to bring others along and communicate effectively.

Expert mindset is helpful in environments where technical expertise and linear, methodological thinking are important.

Expert Mindset Stage at-a-Glance

Thoughts and Storyline

- Perfection is how I will know I have succeeded
- There is a clear solution to every problem
- If I am not in control, I will look incompetent
- I must prove my expertise
- Being right is what matters

Strengths

- Emphasis on specific metrics and standards
- Focus on details and transactions
- Values credentials, titles, and levels
- Prefers information and directions in clear, logical, methodical forms
- Motivated by a sense of competence, expertise, or being right

Blind Spots and Watch outs

- Over rationalization to exclusion of nuance
- Judge others based on own standards of right and wrong
- May not trust anything other than what is within one's own sphere of expertise
- Privilege being right over being effective
- May not be receptive to feedback other than positive acknowledgement

Stretch Exercises for Expert Mindset

- Practice listening to learn rather than to fix, win, solve, or compare.
- Take on leadership of a team in which you are not the technical expert.
- Learn to ask and receive feedback in a constructive, future-focused way.

Coaching Questions

- “How might I be wrong?” (and be open to the answer).
- Would I rather be right, or would I rather be effective?
- What would effectiveness require?

Achiever

“Nothing beats that sense of accomplishment when my goals are reached, and the checklist is complete.”

Mindset Summarized

The Achiever mindset comes across as highly motivated, attentive to team effectiveness, and focused on results. Both people and process are valued to the extent that they serve defined direction and outcomes. For this reason, leaders operating with Achiever mindset cultivate skills for communicating a vision, having conversations for influence and accountability, and providing constructive feedback.

Entering this stage often comes with the realization that it is not enough to be right, smart, or perfect. You also need to be effective and to be effective you need to bring others along. Consolidating in this mindset comes with expanded understanding with a deliberate practice in communicating effectively with others through influence, clear vision setting, and handling conflict well. This also means setting a path by creating goals and plans for reaching them. The Achiever mindset often comes with a sense of responsibility and drive to shoulder a lot or perhaps prove oneself or make a mark that means something to themselves and others. Transitioning out of this stage is often accompanied by the realization that achievement might not be the same thing as fulfillment and that to be authentically fulfilled, one must go deep to discover what matters most, internally and externally.

The Achiever mindset works well in situations where clear goals can be defined and teamwork is important to reach those goals.

Achiever Mindset Stage at-a-Glance

Thoughts and Storyline

- I am my achievements.
- Having clear goals is key to success.
- Work success equals life success.
- If I hit a barrier I just have to work harder or longer.
- I am the responsible one.

Strengths

- Goal focused.
- Communicates to set clear expectations, and bring others along.
- Open to feedback that supports achieving outcomes and goals.
- Works to build the team.
- Values people and their effort as well as the end goal.

Blind Spots and Watch outs

- Overwork and exhaustion from taking on a lot.
- Mistakes focus on goals as sense of purpose.
- Can act hastily when stressed.
- Identity attached to accomplishments and tangible rewards.
- Drive to achieve may override care for self and others.

Stretch Exercises for Achiever Mindset

- Take on a developmental assignment that involves uncertainty and ambiguity where you can't easily define the outcomes.
- Ask for feedback and stay in the feedback conversation to get specific information that can be useful for your development as well as achieving goals.
- Notice what drains you and what energizes you throughout the day. Consider how to restructure your day so that you can build resilience and stay focused on what matters.

Coaching Questions

- What matters more: achievement or fulfillment? What does fulfillment look like?
- What are the boundaries that will clearly define my "no's" and "yes's"?
- How do I get in my own way?



Redefining

“What used to matter to me, no longer does... I am exploring what really fulfills me and deeply resonates.”

Mindset Summarized

Redefining mindset is characterized by a focus on both people and purpose. Leaders who lean into this way of operating consider both the personal and the larger context, often exploring a range of perspectives, diverse options, and the impact on others. Redefining mindset results in a post-heroic approach that is less about the leader and more about what they empower and enable in others.

Entering this stage often comes with the realization that achievement is not always the same as authentic fulfillment. It can also come with a situation that challenges a familiar worldview such as an overseas detail, a move to a more ambiguous and complex role, or a life altering experience. The work of consolidating in this stage comes with opening to new discoveries about oneself, others, and perspectives outside the familiar. For this reason, this stage can be a particularly disruptive and turbulent one, challenging long held assumptions and habits of thought, emotions, and relationship. Transitioning out of this stage usually comes with a sense of coming home to a deeper, more accepting sense of self and what matters most, allowing for greater perspective and less need to react to prove oneself.

This mindset is particularly useful in situations in which it is important to engage others with diverse agendas, navigate complexity, and define a larger purpose.

Redefining Mindset Stage at-a-Glance

Thoughts and Storyline

- Who am I now?
- It's not enough to be effective, I/we also need serve a greater purpose
- What matters most?
- Diversity of perspectives is important and worth the effort to explore
- My worth and who I am is not determined by external standards

Strengths

- Values diverse opinions, perspectives, and styles, including own blind spots
- Takes the time to include others in decisions, change processes, vision setting
- Focus on people processes as well as goals
- Purpose driven beyond own goals to what will serve the greater good
- Challenges the status quo

Blind Spots and Watch outs

- Lose credibility or be seen as indecisive when considering many ideas
- Can become cynical about traditional business practices
- Overlook need for metrics while focused on process and people
- Difficulty prioritizing options, ideas, and perspectives
- Existential angst and confusion as increased awareness shapes new ways of seeing oneself and one's relationship with the world

Stretch Exercises for Redefining Mindset

- Use polarity mapping to explore ways of navigating competing issues and building both/and thinking.
- Work with a coach, mentor, or therapist to adapt new insights and get support for navigating through the questions and disruption that often come with this stage.
- Throughout the day, reflect on the 2 questions– “What does the situation ask of me?” “What is going on for me right now?” Consider what that means for how you might respond in the moment.

Coaching Questions

- What resonates for me so that my head, heart, and gut are all engaged and energized?
- What values would I hold to no matter what? What does that mean for how I engage?
- What conditions and conversations would enable me to both take in different perspectives and steer a path forward?



Transforming

“If only others could see things from this larger perspective, they would understand how it all works together.”

Mindset Summarized

The Transforming mindset works across multiple perspectives, dynamics, and agendas. Attentive to the internal, external, personal, collective, immediate, and longer term, this mindset brings capacity to address the complexity that comes with real change and growth, often resulting in transformational dynamics rather than transactional exchanges. One way this shows up is in an ability to bring together opposing viewpoints and create a middle path or collaborative solutions. It can also show up as a capacity to stay focused on the big picture purpose, while empathizing with others and respecting what it will take to get there.

Entering the Transforming stage often comes with an expanded capacity to relate to others who come at things from different mindsets, as well as an inner calm and confidence in what matters most. The work of consolidating in this stage involves learning to toggle between the bigger picture and the people and processes required to get there in order to best integrate systems and functions. Development in this stage comes with increased capacity for compassion with self and others, skill in translating complexity in ways others can relate to, and owning and appreciating one's own shadows and vulnerabilities. Exiting this stage usually comes with the realization that most everything is relative and interdependent, leading to an openness to even more expansive ways of connecting across lines and holding identity and constructs more lightly to allow for emergent and innovative possibilities as well as greater compassion for all involved.

This mindset works well in ambiguous, complex, and constantly evolving environments.

Transforming Mindset Stage at-a-Glance

Thoughts and Storyline

- We need to start with the bigger picture and purpose
- The systems, functions, and people dynamics are all interconnected
- We can both craft a well-considered solution and iterate on it as it evolves
- I am both at home in who I am... and accepting of my blind spots and shadows
- There is a simplicity on the other side of complexity

Strengths

- Fosters and creates conditions for success for others often with a facilitator/coach mindset
- Tolerates high degrees of V.U.C.A., (Ambiguity)
- Navigates systems within systems
- Cultivates shared accountability and ownership
- Able to own and work with both their strengths and blind spots

Blind Spots and Watch outs

- Can become enamored with their own high-level thinking
- Can come across as distant and arrogant
- Might overlook or dismiss earlier forms of mindset, limiting buy-in
- Can find it hard to translate big picture and mission into actionable steps
- Can get stuck in the complexity rather than drive towards simplicity on the other side

Stretch Exercises for Transforming Mindset

- Explore with team members and others how they relate to the mission and what matters to them.
- Drive for simplicity on the other side of complexity so that it can be captured in a twitter friendly message that all levels can relate to.
- Acknowledge when your shadow is operating and meet it with compassion and curiosity. Shadow refers to the underlying fears and triggers that often are the underbelly of your strengths and motivations.

Coaching Questions

- How might you meet your more vulnerable self with compassion?
- How can you communicate the bigger picture in a way others get what it means for them?
- What enables you to be comfortable with emergence?



Alchemical

“I am coming to see how security is an illusion and everything is constructed and therefore liable to change... I find this immensely freeing and terrifying at the same time.”

Mindset Summarized

Leaders with an Alchemical mindset tend to prefer open, fluid conditions that allow them to embrace what shows up and arises moment to moment. Alchemical leadership, with the right conditions and cohort, can be quite transformative, bringing a quiet wisdom, often behind the scenes, that reassures, grounds, and inspires those around them. That said, they can also find it difficult to be in traditional work environments as they may find more conventional mindsets and ways of working to be constraining. Individuals operating from this stage have the ability to continually readjust how they think, act, and present themselves to stay in the serenity that lies in the eye of the storm. This can sometimes lead others to feel that they are disconnected from the world around them, seemingly aloof or out of touch. Many at this stage can feel alone and misunderstood as there are so few others who really get the experience that comes with this mindset.

Entering this mindset stage often comes with the realization that everything is connected, impermanent, and evolving. The work of consolidating in this stage often involves finding ways to express and pass on the wisdom they possess. This stage can also be a lonely one with co-existing elements of both despair and enlightenment that few others can really get. Exiting this stage often comes with a deeper, calmer sense of knowing and embodiment of essential, timeless truths.

The Alchemical mindset works well in free and open environments in which there is receptivity and appreciation for what they see and sense and a willingness to evolve and adapt.

Alchemical Mindset Stage at-a-Glance

Thoughts and Storyline

- Everything is illusion
- I am part of all of this, and all of this is part of me
- All that matters is this moment
- All is unfolding and emerging, with or without me
- How I am is who I am

Strengths

- Sees interdependencies and how everything is relative
- A deep sense of social and global conscience
- Brings a sense of calm and flow to what they do and how they do it
- Facilitates true diversity across all forms of difference
- Focused on what is arising in the moment and adapts accordingly

Blind Spots and Watch outs

- Can appear disconnected or “out in left field”
- Can be out of touch with what matters for the bottom line
- May create a world of their own in their heads to counter the sense of aloneness
- Talks in a way that others can’t understand
- Can come across as “woo-woo”

Stretch Exercises for Alchemical Mindset

- Deepen in a spiritual or contemplative practice that provides support, grounding, and connection.
- Notice the communication that works in your environment and work with others to communicate what you see in a way that others can hear.
- Explore ancient and different cultural wisdom traditions to connect with eternal teachings that have withstood the tests of time, culture, and constructs.

Coaching Questions

- When do I not feel seen and heard? What do I need in those moments and how might I access what I need?
- What enables me to rest in the moment and open to what is emerging?
- What is the structure and support that allows me to be how I am?

So Now What?

All this is fine and good, but what do you do with it?

Here are 6 self-coaching steps to get you started:

1. Identify what you experience as most true for you most of the time. What is the mindset where you feel most at home, and go to most readily? (Note: we can visit different mindset stages depending on circumstance and conditions, but this may not be our go-to mindset stage).
2. What are the benefits of operating from this mindset stage for you, given your current situation in life and work?
3. How might this mindset limit what is possible in life and work for you at this time?
4. What is one small experiment or practice you might try to stretch your mindset capacity? (Hint: explore the recommendations for your stage as well as storylines and behaviors of the mindset stage just after yours).
5. What would need to shift in order to enable you to step into that practice or experiment? What will it take, what or who will support you, and what might you need to let go of, accept, and pick up?
6. And what is it that makes this development worth doing? How might you remind yourself of why this matters?

If you are interested in learning more about how to expand your mindset range, it can help to use an assessment to get a read on your current mindset stage.

One place to start is with The Vertical Mindset Indicator (VMI). The VMI is a quick online assessment, grounded in decades of research on stages of mindset development.

Different from typical personality and competency assessments, the VMI asks you to complete a short series of sentences, resulting in a report that indicates mindset tendency. The VMI is paired with a technology-enabled coaching process to clarify your growth edge and associated practices and paths for development.

The VMI experience also offers group and one-on-one coaching options to deepen and target the learning with clear action steps and accountability.

[Click here to learn more about the VMI](#) or contact vmi@adeption.io.

The future asks us to be, think, and act with greater range for awareness and response. The mindset stages provide a map to help name, frame, and explore what's possible. How will you build your capacity to meet the opportunities ahead?



About the Author, Jan Rybeck

Jan has been working in the space of personal and professional development for most of her adult life (which is a long time!). As someone who has been a leader herself in complex environments, Jan gets the realities her clients face every day and balances that pragmatism with a grounded positivity, perspective, and inquiry that can open up new possibilities. She has built and led enterprise-wide coaching and leadership development programs within public, private, healthcare, and commercial sectors and held leadership roles with Korn Ferry's US Government business, ICF International, Digital Mobilizations, Inc., and her own consulting firm EdgeWise.

ADEPTION™

Be better