

ADEPTION™



Vertical development.

**A Map for Growing Your Team's
Effectiveness**

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Part 1: Vertical development.

A Map for Growing Your Team's Effectiveness

This position paper series is designed for leaders who want to profoundly enhance their team's effectiveness. Team development often focuses on improving skills such as communication, collaboration, and delivery — which are all essential to high functioning teams.

Our focus here goes beyond these skill sets. This paper explores what it takes to build your team's capacity to continually adapt to meet the complexity, challenge, and change that defines today's business climate. Vertical Leadership Development (VLD), also known as Vertical Development, Adult Stage Development, and Construct Development, is an empirically supported framework for understanding how people's mindsets grow through a predictable pattern of sense-making. In short, VLD offers a map for defining transformational edges and opportunities.

In our practice, we've leveraged the Vertical Mindset Indicator (VMI) and digital coaching experiences on the Adeption platform, to support thousands of leaders in assessing, adapting, and growing their capacity to meet the demands of life and work.

Often, these leaders ask, "How can I apply this with my team?"

It turns out, teams, like individuals, operate from a mindset "center of gravity" that both defines and limits how they take in information, make decisions, determine success, and shape their habits of functioning together. Understanding how mindset can grow through heat experiences, perspective taking, reflection, and deliberate practice, provides teams with options for expanding and flexing to increase their effectiveness.



Further reading

[A leaders guide to Vertical Development, Jan Rybeck MCC](#)

[The How-To of Vertical Leadership Development Part 1, Nick Petrie](#)

[The How-To of Vertical Leadership Development Part 2, Nick Petrie](#)

This white paper series provides team leaders with:

- A framework to clarify your team's direction and approach.
- A map for developing mindset capacity to meet your team's purpose and operational needs.
- Guidance, examples, tools, and resources to build and sustain mindset capacity for high-functioning teams

The following content is drawn from our experiences working with teams using the VMI, one of the first AI-scored assessment tools indicating mindset tendencies based on the empirically validated Washington University Sentence Completion Test. The VMI has been employed by over 6,000 leaders and numerous organizations. For more about the VMI, visit: adeption.io.



What We Have Learned About Teams

At their best, teams leverage the collective talent, smarts, and actions of their members to deliver results that no individual could achieve alone. At their worst, teams drain energy and motivation from their members, deplete organizational resources, and damage credibility. An employee’s experience in a team can often make or break the job for them. Consider these common challenges...

Team members are more interested in telling each other what they know rather than learning from one another.

The team excels at task completion but suffers from burnout.

The team fears taking risks to innovate and experiment.

Communication problems cause issues with both delivery and trust.

Team members do not speak up in meetings.

The team is resistant to change.

Teams are complex, dynamic, and highly contextual. There are no simple plug-and-play solutions for developing an effective team. This raises the question, “How do we develop and sustain a team’s capacity to be attentive, adaptive, and resilient in response to what comes at them?”

The answer lies in mindset development. This involves growing the team’s capacity to wake up to what works and what doesn’t. It also means building the skills and tapping the courage to engage in meaningful conversations to continually improve how team members work together to deliver on their purpose.

The Mindset of a Team

A team’s mindset is reflected in its purpose, activities, how it works together, and the extent to which trust, learning, and risk-taking are valued and encouraged. We identify these as the Five P’s of Effective Teaming:

The 5 P’s of Effective Teaming	
Purpose	Why does this team exist?
Priorities	What is this team doing and delivering to meet this purpose?
Performing	How do team members work together, communicate, meet and hold each other accountable?
People	How does the team attune and attend to the needs of both internal team members and external stakeholders?
Psychological safety	To what degree are team members able to take risks, provide candid feedback, and bring their best selves to the teaming experience?



Reflection questions for leaders:

- What is your team's purpose?
- Why was this team formed?
- How does your team set priorities?
- How do team members relate to each other?
- What are your team meetings like?
- What drives your team's ways of working (beliefs, assumptions, habits, thoughts, and emotions)?
- Who are the stakeholders that the team serves and what are their needs?
- How does the team make space and support for individual members to excel and grow?
- How does leadership of the team enable or hinder the performance of the team?

Now consider what's behind these beliefs, habits, and other drivers.

Which of these high level mindset themes resonate for your team?

- We work this way because it's always been done this way.
- We work this way because it's efficient and proven.
- We work this way because it helps us reach our goals and collaborate well.
- We work this way because it allows for risk-taking, innovation, and learning.
- We work this way to transform the organization and ourselves.

Logic would suggest a team's mindset is a combination or average of the mindsets of its members. We have found it works better to start with the mindset that will best enable the team to effectively deliver on its purpose and support the team to develop towards that mindset.



Consider a river fed by several streams, each with a current shaped by its own unique source, bank, and underlying terrain. When the streams come together to form the larger river, the characteristics of each unique stream give way to the larger river's elements.

Similarly, a team's mindset creates a current that carries its members along, defining and directing how they work together.

Vertical Leadership Development and Teams

Vertical Development is rooted in decades of empirical study in developmental psychology, mapping a predictable pattern of growth in how adults make sense of themselves and their experiences. This growth manifests as an increased capacity to see, understand, empathize, and act from different perspectives.



Using Vertical Leadership Development as a Map

Vertical Leadership Development (VLD) has often been used to gauge leadership capacity, using terms such as “maturity”, “cognitive complexity”, or “ego capacity” to define the strength of a leader. As inviting as it is to use the mindset stages to measure a leader’s capabilities, we have found it works even better as a map.

It turns out, assessing later (higher) on the Vertical Leadership Development scale doesn’t always equate with being a better leader. What does is knowing how to understand, empathize, and skillfully respond across different mindsets and opportunities.

This is as true with teams as it is with individuals. The Vertical Leadership Development framework provides teams with a map for naming the mindset they tend to operate from, the mindset from which they can best deliver on their purpose, and what it will take in order to develop into that mindset.

Take, for example, a team tasked with creating novel approaches to long standing problems. Using the VLD framework, they identify that the mindset they tend to operate from resembles the Expert mindset. This shows up as individual members leaning into their respective areas of expertise with little to no collaborative idea creation. They realize that to create new approaches they need to focus less on telling each other what they individually know and more time asking questions to learn from one another (a Redefining mindset tendency). Using specific practices such as asking good questions, listening to learn, and meeting agendas with space for discussion, they begin to move past their individual expertise to build shared understanding of the problems to solve together and piece together new solutions.

In this way, the VLD framework can reveal clear, specific ways to grow capacity —beyond the familiar — to what is possible.

"You can't solve a problem from the same level of consciousness from which it was created".

– Einstein

Interestingly, many of the teams we’ve worked with rated their team as operating from a mindset earlier (lower) than those the individual team members were assessed at. In other words, while the capacity to operate from a later mindset existed amongst the team members, those same members perceived the collective team experience to be of lesser capacity. The good news here is that the potential to step up and expand capacity exists in these teams — and with slight and persistent shifts in habits and support they can up their game.

The map provided by the Vertical Development stages clarifies the paths, practices, and possibilities to direct and guide this development process. The following cards offer a high level perspective about how teams operate at different mindsets.



Further reading

A more detailed breakdown of how teams operating from different mindsets function including things like decision making, communication, meetings, leadership, and feedback. [Download here](#)



VMI Team Stages

Opportunistic Team

- **Purpose** is to win at all costs.
- **Priorities** are to keep others down so you can be on top.
- **Performs** more like a group of competitors, fighting and manipulating one another to get to the top, secrecy.
- **People** Individual members largely focused on self protection and possible coordinated efforts to protect the team.
- **Psychological safety** doesn't factor in, rather only counts on oneself.
- Useful when under real threat and with no other options but to fight.

Diplomat Team

- **Purpose** is to maintain the status quo.
- **Priorities** are to deliver as things have always been done, often set by the leader.
- **Performs** by following set rules and clear leadership, command and control.
- **People** Team members often act as functionaries following specific norms. Conforming and consistency with how members are is more important than diversity and innovation.
- **Psychological safety** is based on the idea that if you are loyal to the group, the group will take care of you.
- Useful in highly regulated situations and when conforming to rules matters more than anything else.

Expert Team

- **Purpose** is to deliver the right solution to a clear problem.
- **Priorities** are defined by what is most efficient and correct, often set by someone with the highest level of expertise and credibility.
- **Performs** as a group of experts using methodical and rational approaches to provide their own technical solutions.
- **People** Upholding of individual team members' expertise and accessing expert input from external stakeholders.
- **Psychological safety** is based on technical credibility and the ability to deliver correct results.
- Useful in highly regulated technical situations where simple solutions and right answers exist.

Achiever Team

- **Purpose** is to achieve defined goals.
- **Priorities** center around what will be most effective.
- **Performs** through collaborating, communicating and delegating to deliver on a shared vision.
- **People** Recognition of individual members' strengths and opportunities for advancement. Attempts to influence external stakeholders in service of team goals.
- **Psychological safety** is built through clear communication, feedback, and ongoing efforts to build trust.
- Useful in situations where new solutions need to be created.

Redefining Team

- **Purpose** is to innovate to create new possibilities.
- **Priorities** are based on what will contribute to a larger mission.
- **Performs** through candid and mutual feedback, experimentation, iteration, and navigating creating tensions and diverse input.
- **People** Creates space and conditions for diverse perspectives and idea generation from all team members. Considers interests of external stakeholders and systemic impact of team activities.
- **Psychological safety** comes through open dialogue, support for risk taking, learning through failure, and leader modelling the way with vulnerability and their own learning.
- Useful in situations of complexity that require agile and adaptive responses.

Transforming Team

- **Purpose** is to create conditions for and drive transformation.
- **Priorities** are about translating change so that others understand why it matters, what it means for them and how they can thrive through transformation.
- **Performs** through cultivating interconnections within the team, between the team and other systems, and building resilience of individuals to grow through change.
- **People** Team members invest time and care in one another's well being, growth and performance. Attentive and responsive to external stakeholders and the larger systems in which the team operates. The team understands that they are part of and interdependent with these systems and discerning for when and how to work within them.
- **Psychological safety** comes with clear and candid communication and compassion.
- Useful in complex situations where team need a systemic lens to fit and integrate within the enterprise.



Questions for Reflection:

- What purpose does your team serve?
- What priorities must your team address to fulfill its purpose?
- What mindset would best enable your team's goals?
- What mindset does the team's stakeholders — including people the team members lead — require the team to operate from?
- From which mindset does your team currently operate?
- How can your team bridge the gap between its current and needed mindset?
- If your team is already operating from the mindset it needs to, how might you sustain and reinforce those ways of functioning?

Part 2: The Map and The Territory.

Putting Vertical Leadership Development into Action

Now that we've explored the VLD framework and reflected on your team's mindset, it's time to see how teams have successfully used VLD.

Explore real examples in the table below:

BEFORE

A program management team was doing a great job achieving their targets. However there were concerns whether they could keep it up.



Using the VLD framework to identify the mindset that would allow them to sustain success...

OUTCOME

The team identified itself as operating and needing to continue to operate from Achiever mindset. Learning more about this mindset, they defined practices and processes that they were already doing but didn't realize it. This awareness enabled them to be more deliberate in how they worked together. It also revealed potential blind spots such as burn out and enabled them to mindfully get ahead of these pitfalls by:

- Stepping back to consider the larger picture in order to re-prioritize
- Having open conversations about what each team member needed to continue contributing at a high level
- Considering where they had influence to push back or redefine what was expected of them.



BEFORE

An engineering team was tasked with doing more innovative work.



Using the VLD framework to identify the mindset that would allow them to sustain success...

OUTCOME

The team identified the need to shift from an Achiever mindset which had enabled them to consistently perform at a high level, to a Redefining mindset. This shift was difficult at first because achieving milestones was what the team was known for. Shifting to one in which the results were not always clear was unmooring for the team and its members. Plus, their meetings did not allow room for the type of open discussion and inquiry that innovation requires. They decided to start by changing the meeting agenda to allow for more idea exchange — rather than just the usual transactional listing of deliverables. While this change challenged some of the team members to let go of their need to be right and known for their own contribution, the team became more cohesive and supportive of one another, which in turn enabled the team to take risks and experiment with new ideas and learn along the way.

BEFORE

A senior leadership team struggled to build buy-in across the organization ahead of a major change initiative.



Using the VLD framework to identify the mindset that would allow them to sustain success...

OUTCOME

The team realized that despite their tendency to operate from a Redefining mindset, in which they were aware and attentive to the diverse agendas involved in the change effort, they needed to directly address the specific ripples the change would cause throughout the organization. This called for them to adopt more of a Transforming mindset. Through this shift they could toggle between the big picture strategy and on-the-ground realities which required them to communicate down the chain and across functions with compassion and clarity — meeting individuals where they were while clearly setting a path forward. This presented specific development opportunities to grow both as individual leaders and as a leadership team.

Though the context and challenges in each of these examples differ, the common thread is how the VLD framework was used to clarify a developmental growth edge. With that growth edge in focus, the team members together could identify specific practices, structures, and processes to shift the team's habits of thinking, doing, and relating with others.

There is currently very little empirical research that maps how teams evolve through mindset stages. However we have learned through examples like these that teams can often identify and take on developmental opportunities when they have a map to help them find their way.

For a more in-depth exploration of how mindset stages show up with different aspects of team performance, see the [VMI for teams experience](#).



Stumbling onto the learning

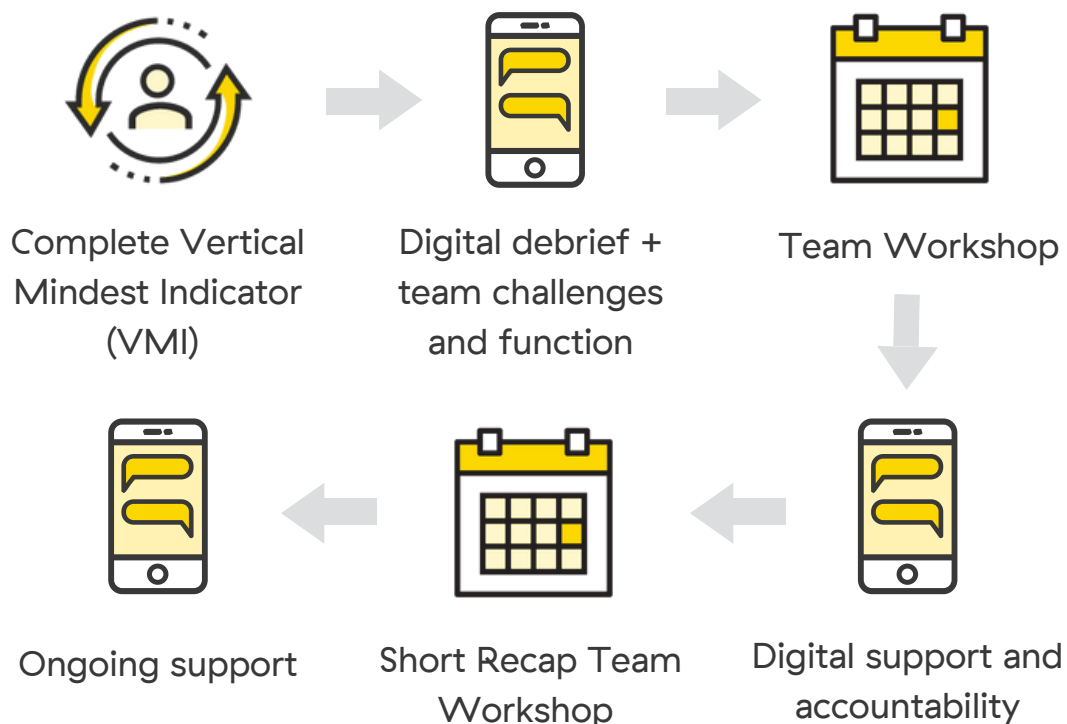
Developing a team’s mindset involves growing the team’s ability to move past default and habitual ways of working together to be more aware, skillful and responsive to the situation.

The ideal formula for this type of deep, transformational development is ‘**more team, less coach**’. While the coach or facilitator can provide the scaffolding and perhaps some resources, ultimately, it’s the team’s work to do.

Most often, teams come to us, not because they are broken, but because they have reached the limits of their capacity to deal with their situation. For this reason, we suggest focusing on what the situation calls for and working from there to define the team’s development opportunity.

The following outlines a basic format for using Vertical Development with a team.

1. Start with grounding team members in vertical development to find their own mindset center of gravity and how it shows up for them. This step provides each team member with a deeply personal understanding of the mindset stages, often drawing them into the process while providing a common language from which to build. *Note: Our work with teams has incorporated the VMI as a way to understand the framework. We use it because it’s affordable, scalable, and accessible. There are other ways in addition to the VMI — see addendum for resources.*
2. Clarify the team’s purpose; why does the team exist and what does that mean for what the team needs to prioritize?
3. Let the team collectively identify the mindset that would best enable it to achieve these priorities and the overall purpose.
4. Work together to identify the gap between where the team is now and where it needs to be.
5. Use the resources provided on how teams show up at different mindsets, to help the team identify specific practices, structures, and processes to enable the mindset shift needed.
6. Work together to identify how team members will hold one another accountable.
7. Individual team members identify how their own mindset contributes to the team’s effectiveness, as well as what the team’s mindset asks of them in terms of their own development.



One final note

Consider...What would your team be, look, and sound like if it were effectively delivering on its purpose and priorities? How would you and your teammates experience and relate to one another? What conversations would be happening? What conversations would NOT be happening? What structures, processes, and habits of practice would you have?

What does that suggest about specific practices, structures and processes to stop, start, or continue?

Despite the term “vertical”, this type of growth is not a race to the top. Vertical Development provides a way to navigate a terrain in which we don’t yet know what we don’t know — exploring beyond what is familiar and habitual, for each of us as individuals and our teams.

This type of growth is not simple, fast, nor easy. It often asks us as individuals, and the team as a whole, to step outside our comfort zone to try things differently and consider different perspectives beyond what we know.

And yet, what is the cost of not stepping up to your team’s potential? What is it that makes this growth challenge and opportunity worth taking on?

ADEPTION™

Be better

As work becomes more complex, organizations need leaders who can deal with more complexity — and more people thinking and acting like leaders.

Adeption delivers scalable leadership development experiences that bring together the human touch of group development and the capabilities of AI. We do this through a combination of facilitated group workshops, digital coaching, action learning, and building in peer and manager support systems.

Our approach brings development into the flow of work, empowering leaders with the skills, tools and support to grow their agility and continuously develop through self-driven practice and reflection.

Find out more on using vertical leadership development with teams, reach out to us at hello@adeption.io | adeption.io

[VMI for teams experience brochure](#)