

## Leader Identity Development:

Exciting Growth at the Intersection of Person and Role-Taking

*Some of our most dramatic gains in leader development owe much to **identity growth spurts**, which occur in the course of facing new challenges. They are effortful, at moments even painful, breakthroughs that transform our ways of thinking, feeling, and relating. They're occasioned by the felt demands of the roles we take. The demands are more than a call to action, they're a call for adaptive learning about self, situation, and what we must do differently in order to thrive.*

*Are you or someone you care about at this intersection of growth? Its arrival is accompanied by feelings of exhilaration and exhaustion, high hopes and perilous fears. It usually includes a pervasive sense that much is at stake, and that we have a significant opportunity to make a difference. Beyond the elation over "upsides" lies a sobering burden of responsibility, often more felt than fully understood. What can we do to make the most of this opportunity and fulfill its responsibilities?*

*This is what I will discuss in this article.*

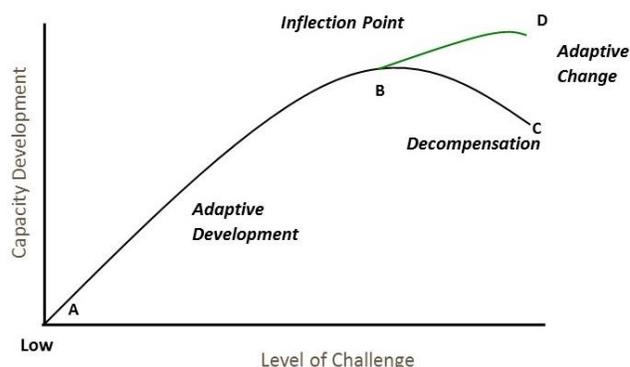
### The Effects of Challenge

From infancy forward, there is within each of us an inherent curiosity and striving to be, to explore, to experience, and to orient ourselves in our surrounding world. We do not do this alone; it's always within a social context and in the company of others who reflect back to us what they see in us. With the best of parenting, teaching (school years), and supervision (in vocational life), we find encouragement in the responses of others as they recognize and affirm our insights and evolving competencies as persons.

In that way, we become known to others and to ourselves as independent centers of awareness with a capacity for intelligent adaptive action. A growing sense of our personal potential to initiate purposive action (agency), and to do so in ways that genuinely express our interests and preferences (personality) constitute core elements of our identity (unique self). And as we cultivate a mature attunement to our normative framework of moral beliefs about what is good, right, and proper, self-identity deepens.

This all occurs, of course, as we navigate the school years, post-secondary education, and early career experience. At some point, our challenges become less about individual task-oriented, practical abilities, especially as we aspire to manage and lead others. Then, challenges become more complex, our success becomes increasingly contingent upon the way we get work done through others. Cognitive, emotional, and relational aspects of working together co-determine our efficiency and effectiveness.

**Figure 1 The Challenge-Development Curve**



Those who seek careers in management tend to be achievement oriented. Presenting them with new or bigger problems or opportunities will typically represent a powerful stimulus for creative-productive action. It will intensify their focus and efforts – cognitive, emotional, and practical. As illustrated in Figure 1, rising levels of challenge will stimulate learning and gains in our capacity to perform...that is, up to a point (A-B). Beyond the *inflection point* we not only observe diminishing returns but actual declines in our capacity to perform.

This downward spiral (*decompensation*) is usually the result of accumulated stress, strain, and fatigue. These effects can build insidiously, just as the boiling-the-frog metaphor suggests. Although it may feel we are suffering these effects privately, it is others who will often first notice their adverse impacts, and not just at work. It's often those closest to us who witness our unvarnished emotional reactions and our insistent assertions that we'll get a handle on it.

### Plotting Our Position on the Curve

As you scan Table 1, I am confident that some of the “warning signs” will be familiar, because you’ve been there yourself or because you’ve observed them in others. Most of us with confidence and a track record of “playing through pain” will rationalize, minimize, or deny feeling stuck. It will be embarrassing to acknowledge that our coping efforts are failing, that our struggles are affecting others. In the best of circumstances this defensive routine is shorter in duration, but it’s almost never nonexistent.

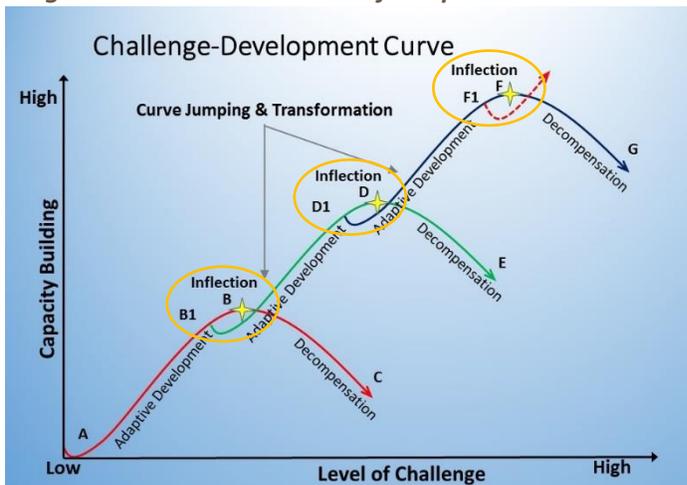
The most important reason to specify the warning signs of an approaching inflection point is to prompt attentiveness. By noticing these signs earlier, we are more able to come to grips with them in a timely and effective manner. Timely intervention, as illustrated in Figure 2, requires a “reflective pause” and perspective-taking at just the time when our focus is narrowing and intensifying. Feelings of desperation are beginning to activate defenses and close off our access to adaptive avenues of action.

**Table 1 Warning Signs of an Approaching Inflection Point**

Warning Signs	Specific Indicators
Declining leadership/managerial performance	Especially in areas expected to be strengths
Noticeably less effective cognitive functioning	Problem solving, judgment, decision making
Myopic viewpoint, lacking context and perspective	Constricted, less imaginative/open, out of touch
Nonverbal style/messages more negative/troubled	Tone conveys tension, anxiety, and impatience
Emotional reactions out of proportion to issues	Quick to anger, discouragement, and frustration
Defensiveness increases in frequency/intensity	Rationalization, blaming, denial, and withdrawal
Significant changes in mood/demeanor/appearance	Personal presence lacks energy, focus, freshness

However, with timely intervention, we can change the trajectory of the curve. In fact, we can perhaps facilitate a “jump” to another curve, achieving a more transformative quality of adaptive change and growth. Doing this requires the counter-intuitive use of the reflective pause mentioned above.

**Figure 2 Multi-Curve Model of Adaptive Growth**



You will notice prior to the *inflection points* B, D, and F in Figure 2 are *reflection points* B1, D1, and F1. There is a downward dip in the new curve of *adaptive development*. It represents the pause, pulling our shoulders back from “wheel” for a moment. There is also an outward shift to the right, which indicates capacity growth that will span even higher levels of challenge.

**Critical Factor:** Prompt Reflection (B1/D1/F1) before Inflection (B/D/F).

These are intervention points. The pause provides us with an opportunity to assess the felt demands of our role afresh. It allows us to appreciate how those demands impinge upon us. In

what aspects of the challenge are we finding ourselves overwhelmed, lacking the know-how or capacity to cope?

Although our individual reflection upon these matters may produce valuable insights and possibilities for action, it is the feedback from others, our stakeholders, that will prove especially helpful.<sup>1</sup> It will help us appreciate what only they can see and report from their role and their experience of our presence and behavior. (For more on the vital importance of feedback, see my recent article on the [Johari Window](#).) With increased self-awareness and other-awareness, we are better able to target key gap themes.

Coaching helps us acquire these data, actively and fruitfully process them for insight, and then translate those insights into work-relevant, role-specific development themes. In such “processing” the coach is there to offer a sufficiently tough quality of “love” (self-discovery & encouragement) to ensure that we formulate realistic ideas about what we need to do differently, where to start, and how to include and involve others in the process. After all, why ask for feedback if we’re not going to invite constructive engagement, right?

## Conclusions

There’s much more to the process of leader identity development that occurs in the course of adult role-taking. And there is more to the art of being there for those we coach through this vital kind of personal growth. Both merit additional attention. However, one further thought I would leave you with is that of an “*Arc of Virtue*.” It’s the arc traced by the upward line of movement that intersects the origin of each new adaptive development curve in Figure 2.

I use these graphical illustrations because I hope they can help us better picture the constellation of forces at work in adult development. Knowing these graphics are based upon well-established theory and empirical research, should give us reason for optimism. But to bolster that point, let me share an even more fundamental truth: It is that none of this is out of reach for any of us unless we choose to believe it is beyond us. Don’t make that mistake!

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<sup>1</sup> To provide relevant feedback for this purpose, we developed the *Leader Identity Questionnaire*,™ which provides 360 feedback on the *Person Qualities*, *Relational Dynamics*, and perceived *Organizational Impacts* of the leader.