

Development at the Inflection Point

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Introduction

One thing we generally do not need to worry about when addressing the development of achievement oriented people is motivational energy. It's usually available in more than ample quantity and intensity. But, as we'll see in the case of John, even our most virtuous sources of motivation may be insufficient when rising levels of stress, strain, and fatigue cause us to lose perspective and composure.

So, I'd like to examine two closely related areas of skill that boost our adaptive capacities to cope and thrive in the face of such challenges: 1) skilled regulation of emotions, and 2) skilled use of mindfulness practices. Both help mitigate the effects of chronic stress and strain that lead to fatigue and burnout. They are also potent personal practices that build our baseline resilience for coping with challenge.

The Challenge-Development Curve

Some readers may be familiar with my graphic illustration of how adaptive development works, the [Challenge-Development Curve](#). In any case, here's a summary: Rising levels of challenge evoke increases in effort, focus, and mental acuity, stimulating gains in learning (A to B) up to a point (B).

But beyond that *inflection point*, we begin to feel overwhelmed by the challenge and experience sharp declines in adaptive functioning (B to C). However, there is good reason for encouragement because such declines (*decompensation*) can be averted if we're able to notice the *warning signs* (Table 1) of an approaching inflection point earlier, i.e., at point B1.

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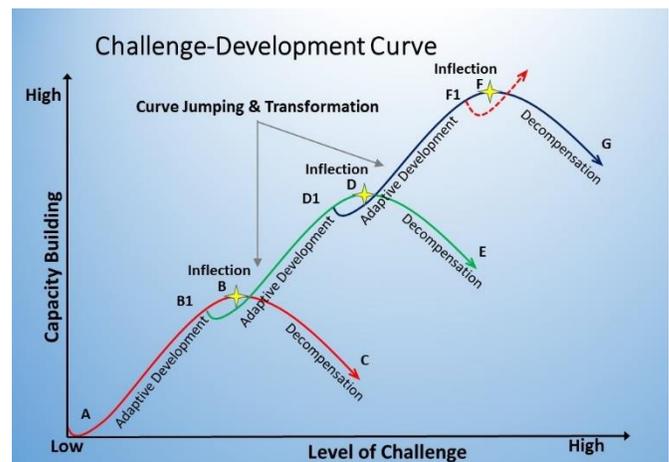
It is through a cultivated quality of attentive observation that we're able to notice the effects of rising levels of challenge earlier, before we hit the inflection point (or breaking point). The effects register in growing feelings of stress, strain, and fatigue (self-awareness). But others notice too.

They witness changed patterns of behavior (Table 1), which are the overt, observable expressions of a person's inner struggle with the subjective effects of rising levels of challenge. We will all experience moments of peak challenge differently. The warning signs and symptoms will vary by individual.

What is it about the nature of the challenge that creates stress and causes us to feel overwhelmed? The obvious suspects are sharp increases in the intensity, complexity, novelty, quantity, and urgency of the demands that we face. Whether real or perceived, they affect us. But there's more to it.

It's also the cumulative impact of these factors (stressors) over time that elevates chronic levels of strain and leads to fatigue. That is why it is so important to notice the felt effects of these stressors early. As

Figure 1 The Challenge-Development Curve



illustrated in the *Challenge-Development Curve*, when we do this it creates a reflective pause – the little “dip” that occurs at B1 – which facilitates regulation of emotion and a mindful shift in attitude.

By noticing, the subjective effects become available for us to work with. Rather than merely suffering them, the reflective pause objectifies them. They become a moment of experience to examine rather than the signature quality of our being as a person (which is what neuroscientists mean when they talk about being “hijacked” by the amygdala, our more reactive emotions).

What Are We Looking For?

Table 1 offers some guidance for attentively noticing change in behavior and performance as we are presented with increasing levels of challenge. The first column (*Warning Signs*) includes the obvious things we see. The second column (*Specific Indicators*) further specifies the nature of these signs. And the third column (*Competencies*) represents what we’d expect to see that signals efficacy.

Table 1 Signs of an Approaching Inflection Point

Signs of an Approaching Inflection Point		
Warning Signs <small>(general observations)</small>	Specific Indicators <small>(symptoms)</small>	Competencies <small>(good looks like)</small>
Declining leadership/managerial performance	Especially in areas expected to be strengths	Skilled action, cued by, responsive to situational demands
Noticeably less effective cognitive functioning	Poorer judgment, problem solving, and decision making	Practical reasoning, timely insights, cogency, prudence
Myopic viewpoint, lacking context and perspective	Constricted, less imaginative/open, out of touch	Curiosity and creativity, openness to ideas, breadth of thought
Nonverbal style/messages more negative/troubled	Tone conveys tension, anxiety, and impatience	Positive mindset, conveys solution-focused, optimistic attitude
Emotional reactions out of proportion to the issue	Quicker to anger, discouragement, and frustration	Equanimity, objectivity, ambiguity tolerance, and balance
Defensive reactions more frequent and intense	Rationalizing, blaming, denial, and withdrawal	Resilience and capacity to cope with stress and strain
Noticeable change in mood, attitude demeanor, and appearance	Personal presence lacks energy, focus, freshness	Pervasively positive-constructive influence, verbal/nonverbal

To make this more concrete, let’s consider how these signs might manifest in the case of client I worked with recently. I’ve tried to preserve a holistic portrayal of the person – let’s call him John – and his real-life situation. In real life, rising levels of challenge derive from work and from home. We’ll then discuss how these observational data can be used to promote adaptive development in his stretch assignment.

The Case of John

The Presenting Situation

John has been promoted to a new and bigger role in a different functional area of the business, Sales. The change includes a new boss, a different subculture, and a heightened level of urgency to produce near-term results. He arrives with a halo of past successes in Marketing and high expectations.

John is married with two young children, and although his wife is on maternity leave with their newest arrival, she will be returning to work soon. There are details surrounding child-care and the emotions of Lisa's return to work that are currently under discussion; life's busy for John and Lisa.

Management sees the change from Marketing to Sales as a "rounding experience" for John. He is among a select group of high-potential candidates from whom much is expected. This role will stretch him, but management anticipates he'll thrive and produce break-through gains in sales.

John's new direct reports have mixed feelings. On the one hand, as seasoned key-account managers they trust their experience and judgement. And although John has been a helpful support resource, his new team "knows" that Marketing and John are naïve to the real day-to-day challenges of Sales.

In initial exchanges, there's been some polite discussion about what they (John and his new team) can learn from one another; it's the *artificial harmony* (Lencioni) that prevails in the *forming stage* of team development (Tuckman Model). More difficult conversations were to come.

Early Signs of Approaching Inflection

Ninety days had passed, and John's initial tone of optimism and assurances of action on "low-hanging fruit" did not materialize. "Okay, it's early," thinks his boss. But questions arise as John's explanations begin to sound like excuses, and as he immerses himself in the details of routine issues.

The word on John was that he's an idea man, someone who gets to the heart of issues quickly and acts decisively. That's not what John's boss, Jason, was witnessing. John seemed ensnared in a paralysis of analysis. Whatever he was learning, if anything, he was not sharing, and it was not showing.

Jason is concerned: "This is not the slam dunk that others thought it might be." He also feels vindicated for having expressed concerns about how long it would take John to get up to speed in his first sales role. He reminds his boss of this without throwing John under the bus. Then asks for coaching support.

Jason's on the hook, and John is savvy enough to recognize it. It's a more complex challenge than John thought it would be. He knew his team was trying their best. Still, that would not yield "break-through" solutions. He believed they respected him, and his credibility was intact, but the clock was ticking.

His track record as a fast learner and low-maintenance star in marketing was not fully transferable. His confidence was shaken. He knew he was stuck and that he needed to reveal this to his new boss. Truth be told, he felt fear, embarrassment, and insecurity, and felt alone with these feelings.

Meanwhile, there were challenges at home too. John and Lisa were struggling to figure out how to cover the cost of the high-quality child care services they wanted. They were both feeling overwhelmed. After all their hard work and planning, why was life feeling so hard? Their frustration was growing.

Acting Out What We "Can't" Discuss

Part of what achievement-oriented people do in the face of challenges is trust their history of having been able to do so before. It takes the form of a quiet, affirmative, empowering voice within them. At times, this can even involve minimizing issues or suppressing feelings of fear and anxiety, perhaps not even knowing that they're doing so! All of this can be adaptive up to a point. John was past that point.

The other thing that these determined personalities often do well is draw from the example and wisdom of others along the way. Their curiosity and drive are noticed, valued, and encouraged by such models. It

wins them privileged access to valuable mentoring, observational learning, and job opportunities. But for some this naturally occurring mentoring trails off at some point. This had happened with John.

Perhaps we begin to believe that we must now show that we can do it alone: “I must put on my big-boy pants now!” When we advance into the high-potential pool and take roles that place us in the upper middle ranks, we may err in beginning to believe that mentoring and coaching should no longer be necessary. But as a person, colleague, and leader, we never really outgrow the need for help.

As supervisors of others’ development, we must be ready to notice this self-limiting phenomenon and remind people that none of us succeed on our own. We depend on others, our colleagues, our direct reports, our boss, and others at home. Fortunately, Jason was there to remind John of this, and to recommend that he engage a coach to help him navigate the steep learning curve he faced.

This made the “unspeakable” open for discussion. As John and Jason talked, they discovered that they both had been sensing that John was stuck in ways described in column one of Table 1. Both shared what they saw (Jason) and felt (John), which helped them further specify his “stuckness” (column 2). And John expressed relief at being able to get help and make a fresh start.

Getting Real, Being Present

Whether the warning signs are first broached in conversation by our boss, at home by our spouse or partner, or by ourselves in either of these two relationships, it is then that real development begins. With the advantages of an external coach at this point – objective assessment, confidentiality, and expertise is adaptive action – we’re even better able to involve others whose help we’ll need.

In my experience, it’s especially critical to open candid dialogue with one’s boss and with one’s spouse or significant other. These are primary places in which self-revelation, feedback, and solution-focused discussion must occur. But before the solution/s in adaptive change, learning, and development can be formulated, we must get to a full understanding of the root cause. That’s where a coach can help.

Feedback is critical. If John’s boss observes a “*noticeable change in mood, attitude, demeanor, and appearance*” (Table 1, column 1), we’ll want to further specify these impressions. They concern rather pervasive and consequential elements of change in how John is showing up: [His] “*personal presence lacks energy, focus, and freshness*” (Table 1, column 2). What’s that about? How do we change that?

When this feedback is provided respectfully, without judgment, and with positive intentions, i.e., “I believe in John and know he can learn from this experience,” it frees John to acknowledge the reality of what he is experiencing. When, in the coaching relationship, they treat these observations as something to be curious about and learn from, it opens space (mental, emotional, relational) for problem solving.

The reflective pause at this point (BI in Figure 1) is critical! And it runs directly counter to our urgent feelings of the moment, which is exactly our intention. We want to interrupt the constrictive, reactive, compulsive tendencies in behavior that operate under the dominance of anxiety and fear, i.e., the parasympathetic nervous system. Our purpose is to understand not to be these emotions.

Mindful dialogue gets these issues out before us where we can examine when and how they arise, and what it feels like in our body, and in our thinking and action tendencies. We want to recognize these

markers, so that we can interrupt old habits earlier and thereby open the way to adaptive growth and change: we notice the markers, let the experience pass, and then focus on what “good looks like.”

The adaptive competencies (Table 1, column 3) for change are initially described in rather general terms, i.e., “*pervasively positive-constructive influence, verbal/nonverbal.*” The critical next step is describing them in situation-specific detail. This is where mindful dialogue becomes more solution-focused. This mode of interaction helps us expand the problem space and discover how to get unstuck.

In John’s case, he took his practice of emotion regulation and mindful reflection into discussions with his team. It helped broaden their shared space for thinking and problem solving, and for a more attentive quality of presence when seeking to be heard on important issues and decision. They became more able to notice and overcome self-limiting patterns of thought and feeling that box them into the status quo.

Conclusion

Table 1 is not intended to be exhaustive in characterizing the ways in which an approaching inflection point might manifest. Rather, it’s meant to illustrate the power and importance of using our natural abilities to observe, notice, reflect, and adapt to the effects of rising levels of challenge.

Obtaining 360 feedback (questionnaire, interview, or combination of both) can certainly be helpful in this regard. However, these data and methods by themselves can prove deceptive in their sufficiency. Insightful noticing and effective responding to warning signs depend most on skills of mindfulness.

Implicit in this approach are several principles. I summarize a few of the more obvious and important ones below:

- First, we all have our limits, and as achievers we routinely take on more than we are currently ready to handle. It represents the expansive qualities of our ego and our motivations.
- Second, achievement motivations operate at the fringes of conscious awareness, so there are usually some driven aspects of our behavior that we must come to know better.
- Third, as we approach the limits of our current capacities to cope and perform in the face of new challenges (tasks & situations) our mind constricts, and we become more reactive.
- Fourth, whether we are using stretch assignments to develop emerging leaders or transitioning senior executives into bigger roles, there will almost always be inflection points.
- Finally, we will “create” some number of unnecessary “false positive” appraisals of readiness unless we realistically factor in the need to mindfully navigate inflection points.

A final word: All models, methods, and principles are intended to guide practice in a general way. That’s valuable because it makes these tools useful across many situations. However, the power of these tools is only fully realized in their adaptive application to the very specific nature of the presenting situation.

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