

APPENDIX B

Stages of Personal Development

As part of our last four years of research, we reviewed the major stage development frameworks and created our own framework of developmental stages that synthesizes previous stage descriptions and incorporates the empirical research described in Appendix A. In Table B.1, you'll see how our stages align with those articulated by Ken Wilber, Robert Kegan, Bill Torbert, and Susanne Cook-Greuter.¹ Most of this Appendix consists of a condensed version of our stage descriptions. It begins with the pre-Expert stages (not described elsewhere in the book) and goes on to summarize the stages from Expert to Synergist.² It ends by answering frequently asked questions about developmental stages and by discussing stages that lie beyond Synergist.

THE THREE PRE-CONVENTIONAL STAGES

Generally speaking, the first three stages cover the period of life from birth to the preteen years. If you have children of middle-school age or younger, these stages may give you new insights into why they do what they do. You may also find it to be an interesting way to reflect on your own childhood.³

The Explorer Stage

At birth, an infant's awareness is immersed in a sea of physical sensations. Newborns can't yet organize these sensations into the perception of physical objects, and they aren't yet capable of goal-directed behavior. However, the infant's physical instincts and reflexes serve as the foundation for the first stage of human development, which typically lasts eighteen to twenty-four months.

Picture an infant reaching out, grasping a rattle, shaking it, then mouthing it, an action repeated frequently during the early months of life. With each repetition, the infant moves through a cycle of awareness, intention, and action. The awareness part of the cycle leaves visual, auditory, and tactile memory traces. The action part of the cycle leaves memory traces that link the initiating impulse to certain muscular movements. Over time, as these impulses and muscular memory traces develop well-established connections, the infant learns to perform this action with dexterity.

This is the infant version of reflective action. Jean Piaget, the French psychologist who began research on developmental stages in the 1920s, found that it's only through countless such cycles of movement and awareness that the Explorer-stage child develops "object permanence," the ability to organize disparate sensations into recognizable physical objects.⁴ At the same time, the infant develops an ongoing desire to pursue interesting, pleasant experiences and avoid unpleasant ones. By the second birthday, the once helpless newborn has become a toddler. Capable of simple goal-directed behavior, toddlers now experience themselves as robust physical beings distinct from the rest of the physical world.

The Enthusiast Stage

The second pre-conventional stage of development begins around the second birthday (the onset of "the terrible two's") and lasts until sometime between the sixth and seventh birthdays. The Enthusiast is constantly on the move, a creature of rapidly shifting moods—alternately exuberant, serene, fearful, and defiant. During this stage, children grow beyond their primarily physical sense of identity and begin to experience themselves as emotionally distinct from others. *I*, *me*, and *mine* are words said with real conviction. Enthusiasts find they can exert their own will, though they can't always get what they want.

Through symbolic play and the acquisition of language, preschoolers develop what Piaget called “representational thinking,” the ability to think about the world using emotionally charged words and images.⁵ Just as object permanence enabled the Explorer to integrate multiple sensory impressions (sight, sound, and so on) into the perception of a unified physical object, representational thinking allows the Enthusiast to integrate multiple perceptions of the same types of objects into words and images (for example, *dogs* and *cats*) that represent what all such objects have in common.⁶

Enthusiasts also develop the most basic understanding of time.⁷ At around three years, children begin to talk about things they want to do the next day: “Tomorrow Sally will be here, and she’ll bring her new doll.” At about four years, children begin to anticipate concrete events farther in the future: “Mommy and Daddy promised me a bicycle on my next birthday!” By the time children have fully developed into the Enthusiast stage, they have a consistent understanding of the difference between past, present, and future.

Enthusiasts aren’t aware that other people might perceive situations differently than they do. For example, while a young preschooler talks on the phone with her grandfather, he asks, “Is your mother there?” She says, “Yes, Mommy’s right there.” She points to her mother, expecting that he can see her as easily as she can. Similarly, a five-year-old looking out the car window on a moonlit night sees a moon that moves alongside the car. Children of this age can’t yet conceive of a moon that exists independently of their own perception. At this stage, children are so enmeshed in imagery that they don’t distinguish between imagination and reality. Animated conversations with dolls and stuffed animals are part of the charm of the Enthusiast’s world.

While the Enthusiast stage brings a level of autonomy and initiative that simply isn’t possible at the Explorer stage, Enthusiasts remain slaves to their impulses, unable to clearly distinguish between imagination and reality. The capacities to regulate impulses and to see beyond immediate perceptions come only with the new stage of development that emerges during the grade school years.

The Operator Stage

Children develop through the Operator stage during their grade school years. Piaget called the level of awareness that emerges at this stage “concrete operations,” the ability to think about the properties

of specific objects (their color, shape, volume, and so on) and organize them accordingly. Concrete operational thinking also allows grade-schoolers to step back from the imagery that permeated their world during the Enthusiast stage and distinguish between imagination and physical reality.

At the same time, Operators develop the ability to regulate their impulses by anticipating the short-term consequences of their action. Together with operational thinking, which allows grade-schoolers to grasp the logic of rules and roles, this capacity enables them to conceive and carry out all kinds of little plans and schemes, allowing them to become the real (though small-time) Operators we see as the lemonade stand entrepreneur, puppet show producer, and collector and trader of favorite objects.

THE THREE CONVENTIONAL STAGES

The stages of conventional development begin with the Conformer stage, which is the stage immediately prior to Expert. Most girls grow into the Conformer stage around age eleven or twelve, while boys usually enter it about a year later. By age fourteen or fifteen the vast majority of high school kids are well-established Conformers. Most people grow into the Expert stage during their late teens. A few who grow into the Achiever stage begin to do so as early as the last year of high school. Most make this transition in college or in their mid-twenties, but some develop into this stage later in life, usually in their thirties or forties.⁸

The Conformer Stage

The level of awareness that emerges at this stage is the most basic level of abstract thought, which allows the young adolescent to think in hypothetical terms, to see what *is* in light of what *could be* and *should be*. This development has a profound effect on adolescents' perceptions of interpersonal relationships. Grade-schoolers know that other people can see things differently than they do, but it doesn't occur to them that others might see *them* differently than they see themselves. However, with adolescents' new ability to imagine hypothetical possibilities, they are quite aware of the fact that other people have feelings and opinions about them. What they imagine often has more to do with their own hopes and fears than with what others actually think, al-

though at this stage this is usually a difficult distinction for them to make.

Conformers very much want to gain the approval and avoid the disapproval of those people and groups they regard as significant. This preoccupation, along with increased impulse control and the ability to think abstractly, gives them the motivation and ability to present themselves in ways they feel will establish the connection they want with the people who matter most.

Yet Conformers are rarely aware that this is their underlying intention. One manager who remained in this stage until her early thirties later described it this way:⁹

I grew up in a small town in Tennessee. I started college but dropped out my freshman year to get married. My husband and I moved to Atlanta, had two children, and made our home in one of its affluent suburbs. I wanted very much to be a part of the social group in that community, so I threw myself into everything from volunteer work to social clubs and the PTA. I didn't realize it at the time, but what I was really doing was trying to create the image I wanted others to see. I did this for years without being conscious that none of this was of any real interest to me.

The Expert Stage

The vast majority of managers grow into the Expert stage during late adolescence or shortly thereafter. As they do so, they develop a strong problem-solving orientation and an ability to think more independently and analytically. However, at this stage, the focus is more on completing tasks and projects than on achieving long-term goals. When facing multiple tasks, each important for different reasons, it's often hard to step back and prioritize them in the midst of action.

Whereas Conformers have a strong interest in fitting into desired social groups, Experts develop an interest in standing out. They expect themselves and others to live up to rather rigid standards, and their ability to empathize with others and to understand those who hold views that conflict with their own is fairly limited. When their priorities conflict with those of others, they're likely either to assert themselves without taking others' needs into account or to accommodate themselves to others' priorities. Balancing assertion and accommodation is difficult.

At the Expert stage, people have a strong interest in improving and accomplishing things. Rather than trying to do things the “one right way,” as they did during the Conformer stage, they now see that problems have many possible solutions. However, they tend to tackle one problem at a time, each as an isolated task, and they find it difficult to step back to see how various problems might be related. Without realizing it, they allow limiting personal opinions and biases to influence their approach. Yet because they tend to assume that their judgments are correct, they’re not likely to test their views against objective data or differing viewpoints.

Experts develop an introspective awareness that makes it possible to recognize recurring inner moods and develop a more independent self-image. Their self-esteem now comes from developing their own beliefs, being respected for their knowledge and skills, and being able to persuade and convince others. When they feel they’re not improving in these areas, they can be quite self-critical. This self-critical tendency and the need to be right combine to make it unlikely that they’ll seek feedback from others.

The Achiever Stage

At the Achiever stage people develop a robust reflective capacity and a greater awareness of the societal and institutional context within which they live and work. Using these capacities, they create their own internally coherent view of the world and an explicit, consciously examined set of principles and ideals to live by. They can think strategically, and their ability to envision future outcomes can make it highly compelling to pursue objectives that may take as long as two to five years to achieve.

Achievers’ ability to imagine themselves in another’s situation gives them a greater capacity for empathy than they had at the Expert stage. They’re receptive to differing viewpoints when they think these views might help them achieve their desired outcomes. In dealing with differences they may be assertive (focused on persuading others) or accommodative (focused on understanding and including others). Either way, there’s a good chance that they’ll try to balance their predominant style, to a certain extent, with its opposite.

When they’re solving important problems, they want these problems to be diagnosed and solved using verifiable data. Because they have a more robust reflective capacity than they had at the Expert

stage, they can see how individual problems are related. They can use various frameworks to conceptualize or reconceptualize issues, and they can develop innovative solutions by taking what was successful in one context and applying it in another.

Achievers develop a level of self-awareness that allows them to reflect on recent events and remember why they acted as they did. Through these reflections and a newfound ability to recall what they were like at many different periods of their life, they develop a solid sense of their own identity. Because they can vividly imagine the future effects of their actions, they have a strong sense that they control their own destiny, and their professional self-esteem comes primarily from believing they've contributed to the achievement of significant outcomes.

THREE POST-CONVENTIONAL STAGES

Research studies focusing on adults who have at least a college education indicate that approximately 12 percent have grown into one or more of three post-conventional stages: Catalyst, Co-Creator, and Synergist.¹⁰

The Catalyst Stage

In the Catalyst stage, people begin to feel more at ease with change and uncertainty, and they develop a broader, longer-term view of the environment within which they live and work. As a result, their aspirations tend to be more visionary than they were in the Achiever stage. They also develop a strong interest in the quality of life and the process of human experience. Because they recognize that sustained achievement of desired outcomes takes place within a larger context of human relationships, enhancing these relationships becomes an important priority.

Catalysts have a deeper capacity for empathizing with others, because they can now imagine fairly accurately what it's like to be another person, facing whatever situation they're facing. They develop a real curiosity about frames of reference that differ from their own, and they listen to other views because they genuinely want to consider new possibilities. In responding to people whose views differ from their own, they move more fluidly between assertiveness and accommodation.

Their enhanced ability to “try on” differing frames of reference makes their thinking more creative than it was at previous stages. Their enhanced awareness of the power of frames of reference often leads them to question their assumptions and those of others when framing problems and developing solutions. They’re more likely to see that specific problems are part of a larger pattern of issues caused by deeper, unresolved organizational issues, and they’re more aware that solutions can have unintended consequences.

At the Catalyst stage, people develop a new capacity for self-observation that allows them to recognize feelings, assumptions, and priorities that would otherwise escape their conscious awareness. They begin to realize how much their need to achieve comes from a desire for approval and recognition. They also discover that the primary determinant of their self-esteem is their own attitude toward their successes and failures. They become more proactive in seeking and applying feedback, more willing to accept and deal with inner conflict, and more adept in responding to new and uncertain situations.

The Co-Creator Stage

Co-Creators add to the Catalyst orientation a more fully experiential awareness that develops the intellectual and emotional capacities needed to create deeply interdependent relationships. Co-Creators become interested in committing themselves to relationships and enterprises that reflect an intangible and evolving sense of life purpose, a direction that increases inner fulfillment while enhancing the lives of other human beings.

Co-Creators develop the capacity to enter more fully into differing frames of reference, and this development deepens their capacity for empathy. They prefer relationships characterized by shared purpose and collaboration, where mutual commitment and respect for individual autonomy are experienced as complementary opposites. Their capacity for developing these kinds of relationships is supported by their ability to balance self-assertion with appropriate receptivity to others’ needs.

At this stage people can step back from multiple frames of reference (including their own), and identify where these frames conflict and where they have common elements. When they’re faced with opposing viewpoints, they’re quite capable of making tough choices. However, on important issues, they generally prefer not to take sides

immediately but to explore what is possible by bringing those with differing perspectives into relationship with one another. Their capacity for integrative thinking gives them the ability to engage in creative problem-solving dialogues that can lead to true win-win solutions.

Co-Creators develop a level of self-awareness that allows them to stay with difficult and unfamiliar feelings longer than they would have at the Catalyst stage. As they become aware of a wider range of feelings and assumptions, they discover inner conflicts. By experiencing and working through these conflicts, they begin to integrate into their conscious personality various parts of themselves that they'd formerly walled off or ignored. As they become more attuned to their real thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, they increase their capacity for authentic self-expression and for experimenting with new perspectives and behaviors.

The Synergist Stage

At this stage people develop a strong wish to engage with life in all its fullness, a deep concern about human issues, and an evolving sense of life purpose that's in some way linked to that concern. Even when they live and work in contexts where their commitments are not shared, they continue to take initiatives that are aligned with their sense of purpose. Many Synergists have compelling feelings about being at the right place at the right time and intuitions about next steps that keep them "on purpose."

Although they can now make use of many forms of power, Synergists cultivate the "power of presence," a subtle form of power and agility that comes from being centered in the present moment. As this capacity develops, they may sense subtle energetic dynamics within people, groups, and organizations that would have escaped their awareness at previous stages. They're also able to remain focused on the common good while holding in mind, in an accurate and empathetic way, conflicting stakeholder views and interests, including their own.

When they're working with others to solve ill-structured problems, Synergists' well-developed capacity for holding mental and emotional complexity often gives rise to "synergistic intuitions" that resolve apparently irreconcilable conflicts in ways that are beneficial for all parties involved. However, even when their intuitive breakthroughs seem

to do just that, they usually test the practical validity of these insights by getting feedback from others and by testing their ideas in action.

The wish that Synergists have to engage with life in all its fullness leads them to cultivate a direct, present-centered awareness of their five senses, their physical presence, their thought processes, and their emotional responses. As a result, they develop an enhanced, nonjudgmental awareness of their habitual patterns of thinking and emotional reactions. This awareness motivates them to further develop their attention, so they can gradually free themselves from the domination of reactive mental and emotional patterns. It also opens them to the joy and wonder of being alive.

FAQS ABOUT DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

When people are introduced to the idea of developmental stages, they often have a number of questions. Here, we answer some of the most basic and frequently asked questions. Feel free to skip any of these questions that aren't your own.

Does everyone always develop through these stages in the same order?

Yes. Maybe it's the words *everyone* and *always*, so overused at the Conformer stage, that make some people pause when they hear this answer. After all, how many things in life are *always* true for *everyone*? Yet multiple cross-cultural, longitudinal studies have repeatedly confirmed that this developmental sequence is universal. In these studies, researchers have found no examples of people who've skipped a stage or moved through the stages in a different sequence.¹¹

Perhaps the easiest way to confirm this conclusion for yourself is to reflect on some of the earlier stages. After the Explorer (infant-toddler) stage, children spend the rest of their preschool years developing through the Enthusiast stage, where they acquire language and learn to think in words and images. It's difficult to imagine how a toddler could skip this stage and, still unable to speak and think in words, go directly to the Operator (grade school) stage, and begin to make conceptual distinctions like this one: When you pour water from a tall, skinny beaker into a short, fat beaker, the volume of water remains the same, even though it's taken on a different shape.

Similarly, it's hard to imagine a five-year-old child in the Enthusiast stage skipping the Operator stage and suddenly developing the ca-

capacity for abstract thought, which emerges at the Conformer stage. Because each stage emerges from and builds on the one before it, it's even harder to imagine a child who could develop through the first four stages, but in a different order. The same is true for the adult stages. You can't reach the Achiever stage without first developing to the Expert stage. As an Achiever, you don't suddenly develop into the Synergist stage, then later go back and develop through the Catalyst and Co-Creator stages.

Even if the sequence of these stages doesn't vary, isn't it possible for a person to reach a particular stage of development and then regress to an earlier stage?

The type of regression that can and does happen is almost always temporary. For more than two decades, Robert Selman and his colleagues at Harvard University have studied children at play from a stage development perspective, using their insights to devise ways to help kids create healthy, age-appropriate friendships. Their research, based on endless hours of direct observation, has shown that playtime conflict can deteriorate to a point where children behave as if they were at earlier stages of development. Most parents need no convincing on this point.¹²

The same thing can happen to any adult. You can probably think of examples from your own experience. To investigate this question, developmental psychologist Harry Lasker conducted research with graduate students at Harvard. When these students participated in highly concrete, competitive games with strict win-lose structures, they often behaved as if they were at earlier stages of development. Once the experiments were over, they returned to their previous level of functioning.¹³

In a note to the Introduction, you said that these stages do not refer to age-based life eras or to the "passages" between them, such as the midlife crisis. But for many of the stages you describe, especially the earlier ones, you refer to the ages when people are most likely to be in each stage. Are these stages age-related or not?

During the early stages of life, it's relatively easy to predict developmental stage by knowing a person's age. However, the research shows that, with each new stage, the link between stage and age becomes

increasingly approximate. By the early twenties, any close connection between age and stage disappears.¹⁴ This statistical disconnect between adult age and stage reflects the fact that adult stage development is not automatic. Consequently, although the early stages are closely correlated with age, it's really impossible to predict an adult stage from someone's age. We've provided information about what is known about stage and age to make it a bit easier to relate the stages to your own life.

If an adult has a high IQ, does this indicate a more advanced stage of personal development than other people?

An adult with a high IQ, as measured by standard intelligence tests, could be at the Expert stage, the Synergist stage, or anywhere in between.¹⁵ Stage development, as we're defining it here, refers to the growth of the whole person. As people grow from stage to stage, they develop capacities that allow them to deal more effectively with change and complexity.

When you say that people at the more advanced stages are more developed than other people, aren't you promoting a hierarchical or elitist way of thinking about human beings?

The framework we've presented in this book outlines stages of human development, not a status hierarchy. We're not saying that those people who currently occupy the top levels of today's business, political, or social hierarchies are necessarily well-developed human beings. (It's easy to think of a number of people in these positions who are not very highly developed.) What we're saying is that, as you develop, your ability to deal effectively with change and complexity increases. Put differently, growth through the stages is not about moving toward perfection. It's about moving toward *wholeness*.¹⁶

Developing in this way doesn't make you better than others, but it can make you a more effective leader in today's turbulent world. In fact, as you develop beyond the Achiever stage, you become less egotistical and less judgmental and hierarchical in your attitudes toward yourself and other people. You honor and respect others, simply because they are fellow human beings.

STAGES BEYOND SYNERGIST

In the 1950s, most stage developmental psychologists believed that the Achiever stage represented full adult development.¹⁷ Today, many believe that the Co-Creator or Synergist stage represents the apex of human development. Our view of the Synergist stage aligns with that of Ken Wilber and Bill Torbert, who see it as a potential gateway to further, even more rarely accessed stages of human development. (See Table B.1 at the end of this Appendix.)

In Wilber's early work, he called his equivalent of the Synergist stage "the centaur," a term intended to convey a more conscious connection between body and mind.¹⁸ While the Synergist stage marks the culmination of post-conventional development, it can also serve as the first stage of what Wilber calls "transpersonal" development.¹⁹ By using this terminology, Wilber points to a process of transformation that goes beyond development of the individual personality. Though it may affect the personality, transpersonal development refers primarily to the cultivation of more selfless inner potentials—for example, deep equanimity, wisdom, and compassion.

In Wilber's framework, which is based on extensive examination of both ancient and modern forms of personal transformation, transpersonal development potentially includes nine distinct stages. In *Integral Psychology* and in other works, he organizes these nine stages into four levels of development, which he calls psychic, subtle, causal (or formless), and non-dual. In *Action Inquiry, The Power of Balance*, and earlier books, Bill Torbert describes three stages beyond what we call the Co-Creator: the Alchemist stage, the Ironist stage, and a further stage he simply designates with a question mark. His Alchemist stage corresponds to Wilber's psychic and subtle levels, his Ironist stage corresponds to Wilber's causal (or formless) level, and his question mark refers to Wilber's non-dual level.²⁰

Because Torbert's three most advanced stages and Wilber's four transpersonal levels each includes multiple stages, they can be described as "zones" of development, similar to the Pre-Conventional, Conventional, and Post-Conventional "zones," each of which includes several stages.

We should note that the Synergist stage, as presented in this book, represents only the beginning of what Torbert calls the "Alchemist" stage. Rather than attempt to clearly define where the Synergist stage ends and the next stage begins, we prefer to leave this question, particularly as it applies to leadership, for further research.

Wilber	Kegan	Loevinger	Cook-Greuter	Torbert	Joiner and Josephs
Pre-personal					
Sensorimotor	Incorporative	Pre-social	Pre-social		Explorer
Phantasmic-emotional		Symbiotic	Symbiotic		
Rep-mind	Impulsive	Impulsive	Impulsive	Impulsive	Enthusiast
Concrete operations	Imperial	Self-protective	Self-protective	Opportunist	Operator
Personal			Conventional	Conventional	Heroic
Formal operations	Interpersonal	Conformist	Conformist	Diplomat	Conformer
		Conscientious/conformist	Conscientious/conformist	Expert	Expert
	Institutional	Conscientious	Conscientious	Achiever	Achiever
			Post-conventional	Post-conventional	Post-heroic
Post-formal/vision-logic		Individualistic	Individualistic	Individualist	Catalyst
	Inter-individual	Autonomous	Autonomous	Strategist	Co-Creator
		Integrated	Construct-Aware	Alchemist	Synergist
Transpersonal					
Psychic			Unitive		
Subtle					
Causal (formless)				Ironist	
Non-dual				?	

Table B.1. Comparison of Developmental Stages.