
A Response to Dave Snowden's Critique Of 'Vertical' Adult Development Theory

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In the 9/22 Coaches Rising podcast, Dave Snowden (management consultant and creator of the Cynefin model of strategic sense-making) critiques adult development theory as elitist and hierarchical; as individualistic and insensitive to the effects of context on individual action; as linearly progressive; as mistakenly conflating cognition and consciousness; and as largely unsupported by field experimental data.

It is important to study this critique carefully because it can validly describe anyone's use of adult development theory, especially when it is used as an analytic tool, apart from its dynamic twin, action inquiry practice. Action-inquiry is not just a term, it's a way of making sense of the world and of our living. The Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry (CDAI) approach to personal and organizational developmental transformation is unique in its emphasis on an entire 'dictionary' of collaborative developmental practices (*Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Erfan & Torbert, 2015; Herdman-Barker and Wallis, 2016; Torbert, 2004, 2021*).

First, we agree with Snowden that developmental theory can be wielded in practice in an elitist, hierarchical fashion by suggesting that, and otherwise acting as if, one inhabits a 'higher class' (later action-logic) than another. However, to do so is a unilateral use of power, an action inconsistent with the attention of the later-stage action-logics towards collaboration and mutuality.

The earliest adult developmental action-logics (**Opportunist, Diplomat, Expert**) wield the most unilateral, hierarchical forms of power; whereas the later action-logics (**Redefining, Transforming, Alchemical**) exercise more mutual types of power. In short, the practice of the later action-logics is the very opposite of elitist and hierarchical, but rather collaborative and responsive. For example, we invite anyone who is taking our Global Leadership Profile (GLP) to make their

own estimate of their current developmental action-logic prior to receiving the GLP results. Then, in consultation with a certified coach, who may offer their own estimate of the participant's action-logic, based on their behavior during the coaching session, the participant weighs the similarities and differences among the three estimates (**1st-person [self], 2nd-person [the coach], and 3rd-person [the GLP]**).

Second, we would agree that, as Snowden claims, many presentations of adult development theory are individualistic and context-free, but this is emphatically not true of CDAI, which offers a developmental theory of organizational development intertwined with the theory of individual development. Furthermore, CDAI proposes the practices of 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-person action inquiry to be exercised in the midst of action, concerning self, others present, and organizational norms. These situation-specific, developmental estimates are to be treated as hypotheses that one is testing. (This action inquiry approach is consistent with Snowden's formulation that you do not want a theory that tells you 'do this, then that, then that...', but rather a theory that tells you 'do this, check, do that, check...'.) Working skillfully with Vertical, in our approach, is about making it practical everyday...and acknowledging the fluidity in our approach to problem resolution, seeing moments when we rely on earlier logics, or draw on an understanding from a later action-logic that, until that point, we had yet to imagine.



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Third, it is true that adult developmental theory has a progressive quality to it, but shorter or longer periods of fallback are also frequent (McCallum, 2008; Livesay, 2022). Just as one learns to run only after one learns to walk, so one may learn, in practice at the Transforming action-logic, that there is a developmental order of action-logics; but we realize this only after experiencing the Redefining action-logic and the loss of our previously taken-for-granted perspectives.

In practice, the movement between action-logics is anything but linear (except in the simplest mappings). Each transformational period can last for years and is typically a turbulent time. Moreover, each later action-logic is increasingly aware of the ongoing, under-the-surface turbulence within self, others, and institutions. At the Transforming action-logic, one's context-awareness affords capacity to enact whatever action-logic is strategically most likely to support effective action in this particular moment.

Fourth, Snowden's critique of adult development theory as conflating complexity of thinking with presence of embodied awareness and post-cognitive consciousness is widely and importantly valid. Uniquely, though, the CDAI approach posits four distinct but intertwined ontological 'territories of experience': post-cognitive consciousness, mind, embodied awareness, and the material world. To be aware in the moment of how one's own and others' strategy and practice are affecting the situation requires cultivating the 'bare attention' of post-cognitive consciousness. A person continually encounters this challenge in the oscillation between the Transforming and the Alchemical action-logic. The collaborative developmental action inquiry

process (individually, socially, and scientifically) leads us toward recognizing and seeking to align these four territories of experience (e.g. purpose, strategy, practice, and outcome).

Finally, Snowden's critique of the lack of field experimental research to support adult developmental theory has some validity, since a great deal of developmental research (e.g. using Loevinger's Washington University Sentence Completion Test) has involved correlating results from her measure to results from other psychometric measures. However, the CDAI line of research and practice has conducted a number of field studies that strongly support the validity and the degree of variance accounted for by the Global Leadership Profile measure of ego development. For example, one study showed that whether or not a company's CEO and lead consultant measured at the Transforming action-logic accounted for 59% of the variance (beyond the .01 degree of significance) in whether the organization transformed during the period of study. In other words, the leaders' Transforming action-logic made more difference than all other factors combined in whether an organization succeeded in achieving sustainable transformation. Of course, this single finding is not the end of the inquiry, but for some readers it will motivate more research of the CDAI kind into what your own action-logic might be and into the action inquiry processes that will inform you more about your colleagues and contexts, and about the exercise of mutual power.

In conclusion, the developmental action-logics and the action inquiry processes do not, alone, define a person, but are instead extremely useful variables for the ongoing study of self and others in everyday situations.



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