



EXECUTIVE

COACHING

PRACTICES  PERSPECTIVES

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LEADERSHIP AND COMPLEXITY OF MIND

The Role of Executive Coaching

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This chapter concerns a relatively new field of study—the development of complexity of mind in adults and the ways in which understanding that development affects those who work to support adults.

We have all known for some time that children and adults see vastly different worlds. For example, spend fifteen minutes with a three-year-old on an airplane, and you'll discover that, for her, the cars below actually *are* tiny cars, driven by tiny people and parked in tiny garages, and that, after you land, the cars—and the people and garages—grow large again. This kind of “magical thinking,” as it has been described (Fraiberg, 1959), disappears fairly early in children's lives. The world changes as children discover that the size of objects is constant, regardless of how far from the objects they

themselves move. The world becomes stabler, and we say—sometimes with nostalgia, sometimes with great relief (often with both)—that the children have *developed*.

Those who study adult development, however, are learning that such drastically different ways of looking at the world may well continue throughout a person's life span. The magical thinking of a three-year-old who believes cars grow and shrink may become the magical thinking of a thirty-year-old who watches a report transform from an accomplishment of which to be proud, when his colleague praises it, into a source of shame, when his manager criticizes it. This chapter explores the implications of adult development for executive coaching, arguing that if coaches are to be able to support leaders well, it is vital that they understand the many different worlds these leaders may inhabit.

We have worked with clients from a diverse array of organizations—from Fortune 500 companies to struggling Internet start-ups, from leaders of schools to leaders of the military. We have seen a wide variety of differences in the external worlds these leaders inhabit: in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors; in local and multinational companies; in stable and emerging technologies. One of the most difficult differences to understand, however, is found not in the external world of the executives with whom we work, but in the internal complexity with which those executives view that world. The constructive-developmental theory of Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) offers us a powerful way to understand the complexity of mind of the leaders with whom we work—and to support the development of complexity.

Executive coaches bridge the two different—but clearly interacting—worlds of the executive and the executive's organization. A good coach knows that it is vital to have a sense of the key corporate issues that surround the executive and, also, that he or she must understand those issues both from the executive's perspective and from the perspectives of others in the organization. Often, the way an executive makes meaning of key corporate issues—rather than the issues themselves—shapes the work of the coaching.

Kegan's work focuses on the ways in which people make meaning of the world around them. As a constructive-developmental psychologist, Kegan, like other constructivists, believes not that the world is out there to be dis-

covered but that we create our world through our interaction with and interpretation of it. Like other developmentalists, Kegan believes that humans grow and change over time and enter qualitatively different phases in the process. Kegan's framework is powerful because he joins these two schools of thought and suggests a clear pattern for the development of the systems by which people make meaning.

This chapter focuses on two key aspects of Kegan's work:

- The movement from Subject to Object—the basic process for becoming more complex
- Orders of mind—five qualitatively different ways of constructing reality, which develop from less to more complex

For each of these aspects of Kegan's theory, the following sections define the concepts and explain the theory surrounding them, outline the implications for executive coaching practice, and suggest ways in which executive coaches can support the performance and development of executives through an understanding of these concepts.

The Movement from Subject to Object

The more elements we can see, respond to, and make decisions about, the more complex a view we have. Kegan's theory explicates this idea and suggests ways to increase the number of elements we have under our control.

The Theory

Kegan distinguishes between *informational* learning, which is new knowledge added to the current form of one's mind, and *transformational* learning, or learning that changes the very form of one's mind, making it more spacious, more complex, and more able to deal with multiple demands and with uncertainty. According to Kegan (1994), transformation occurs when we develop the ability to step back and reflect on something that used to be hidden or taken for granted and to make decisions about it. He says transformative learning happens when someone changes "not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows—not just what

he knows but the *way* he knows” (p. 17). Transformation happens in many ways; the most vital to Kegan is the movement of things from *Subject* to *Object*.

In Kegan’s scheme, things that are Subject are by definition experienced as unquestioned, simply a part of the self. They can include many different things—a theory, a relational issue, a personality trait, an assumption about the way the world works, behaviors, emotions—and they can’t be seen because they are the lenses through which we see. For this reason, they are taken for granted, taken for true—or not even taken at all. We generally can’t name things that are Subject to us, and we certainly can’t reflect on them—that would require the ability to stand back and take a look at them. We don’t *have things* that are Subject; things that are Subject *have us*.

Things that are Object, however, can be seen and considered, questioned, shaped, and acted on. Something that is Object can be a theory, a relational issue, a personality trait, a belief, behaviors, or emotions. And, while things that are Subject *have us*, we *have things* that are Object. Because it isn’t the lens through which we see, something that is Object can be held out and examined. Although we each necessarily have many parts of our world that are Subject, one key aspect of development involves moving more and more things from Subject to Object. The more we take as Object in our lives, the more complex our worldview becomes because we can see, reflect on, be responsible for, and act on more things.

Implications for Practice

Understanding the movement from Subject to Object has profound implications for executive coaching practice for three reasons. First, although executive coaching often focuses on increasing the executive’s knowledge or skill, a substantial amount of executive coaching involves helping executives make Subject–Object shifts. In many cases, this happens when coaches help executives surface and examine their hidden assumptions about the world. Uncovering these assumptions can lead to important insights for executives. The following are some examples of insight that involve a Subject–Object shift:

- *I was always the responsible one in my family and I guess I ended up controlling things. I’ve been talking about empowering staff, but I haven’t really been willing to give up control.*

- *I was taught that being loyal to my boss and my company came first, but now I see that doing the right thing can be much more important than loyalty.*
- *I always prided myself on being the smartest and the quickest person in the room. It's amazing to realize that I'm keeping my staff dependent on me by always having the answer first and that by doing so I'm keeping them—and me—from being more successful.*

If coaches can identify when a client is working on a move from Subject to Object and if they are skillful in supporting that move, they will be more successful in helping their clients both be effective and develop.

Second, it is essential for coaches to realize that the movement from Subject to Object is more challenging than it may appear. Clients may have difficulty seeing the limitations of ways of understanding and dealing with the world that have worked well for them and that they experience as coherent. Kegan notes that the first impulse of those who make discoveries about the limited nature of their beliefs, assumptions, or worldviews is *not* to welcome that discovery. Instead, people work to change the shape of the world itself by selectively ignoring data, eliciting particular responses, or making creative interpretations of events such that the belief, assumption, or worldview might remain true.

In addition, no matter how valuable and important it might seem to hold on to and examine an insight as Object, the insight tends to fade and become Subject again. This tendency for insights to be reabsorbed as Subject accounts for the familiar experience of encountering an important new insight and realizing that you made the same discovery in, say, a conflict situation last year, a workshop two years ago, and in therapy five years ago. It also explains why a client can have a critical new insight during a coaching session, and be very taken by and influenced by the insight, and then in a short time be back to business as usual, behaving as if the insight had never taken place. Kegan and Lahey (2001) suggest that we need to consciously build some “psychological muscle” over time so that we can hold out an insight as an Object to be examined instead of reabsorbing it as Subject again. (See the Strategies section on pages 32 to 35 for ways of helping clients sustain the Subject–Object shift.)

This psychological muscle is hard to build because giving up a way of understanding oneself and/or one's world can be painful. Discussions about

executive coaching typically pay little attention to the losses that can come with a change in belief or perspective. The adult development literature, on the other hand, explains why giving up an old belief might be associated with loss. Committing ourselves to a new belief means giving up an old one, actually losing our former sense of the world before we have fully articulated our new world (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986; Kegan, 1994; Perry, 1968).

Third, it is important for coaches to understand the Subject–Object shift because it represents an increase in complexity. Although the movement may seem fairly small (and perhaps straightforward and even obvious to the coach), an increase in complexity can shake up a client’s way of seeing and dealing with the world, thus affecting the client’s self-concept, relationships, goals, and plans. The assumption that the world was flat—which fourteenth-century Europeans accepted as *fact*—made ocean travel terrifying and extremely limited. The simple questioning of that assumption—which seemed ludicrous at the time because the assumption seemed so obvious and *true*—opened up the oceans and greatly expanded the known world. Tiny shifts in what seems possible can literally change the world.

Executive coaches must understand and respect their clients’ inclinations to hold on to their previous notions of the way that the world works—even as they try to influence those notions and help make them more complex.

Strategies for Supporting the Movement from Subject to Object

There are two aspects to supporting a Subject–Object shift in executive coaching:

- Recognizing when a client is dealing with a Subject–Object shift
- Providing support for understanding and maintaining a Subject–Object shift

Each is addressed below.

Recognizing When a Client Is Dealing with a Subject–Object Shift

A client may need to make a Subject–Object shift when she reports feeling stuck or at her wit’s end, or when a client who is typically articulate, perceptive, and resourceful becomes uncharacteristically tongue-tied, muddled, or helpless.

David, an executive coach, was coaching Jeanne, an executive who was seen as very smart and capable and had risen quickly to a key position in her company. Jeanne talked with David about how burned out she felt and discussed her concerns about neglecting both her health and her life outside of work. After some brainstorming, Jeanne agreed, as a first step, to set some modest limits on her work hours. However, after a number of coaching sessions, she expressed frustration with her lack of progress with setting limits. It became clear that Jeanne was driven by something she could neither name nor see that was making it difficult for her to cut back. David inquired about Jeanne's earlier work history, and after an intense discussion of her aspirations for the future, Jeanne realized that she was driven by the belief that if she wasn't constantly the fastest-rising star, she would lose all of her hard-earned success and quickly sink into mediocrity and failure.

Like Jeanne in the case above, a client may have identified both her central problem (overworking) and a possible solution (setting modest limits on her hours) and—even with the best of intentions and plenty of motivation to make the change—still seem unable to change her behavior. Jeanne is mired in her earlier paradigm and can't seem to keep a clear and constructive view of the problem or move toward resolving it. To help such a client escape the paradigm, a coach needs to be able to recognize that the client is stuck and to support her in both seeing the paradigm and seeing a way out of it.

Providing Support for Understanding and Maintaining a Subject–Object Shift

Once a Subject–Object shift has been identified, the newly recognized existing belief must be treated with seriousness and respect. Kegan (1994) reminds us that, to be a supportive, useful structure, “a bridge must be well anchored on either side” (p. 37). In other words, coaches must have respect for and pay close attention to their clients' current beliefs as well as to the more complex way of understanding the issues at hand they hope to encourage in their clients. (See Chapter 6 for a related approach.)

Kegan (1995; see also Kegan and Lahey, 2001) postulates five steps that may help a belief about the world move from Subject to Object:

- Naming the belief
- Noticing the implications of the belief
- Looking for discrepant evidence
- Charting the history of the belief
- Testing the truth of the belief

Kegan's suggested first step toward making Subject into Object is simply to know that it exists, to name it. Once Jeanne named what she felt was the root of her behavior, she was able to reflect on it. The important change here wasn't discovering the behavior—after all, she knew she had been driven for most of her adult life—but discovering the *root* of the behavior.

Kegan asserts that the second step in changing an assumption about the world is simply to notice how the assumption or belief changes the possibilities available to the person who holds it. Because Jeanne had previously believed—albeit unconsciously—that this behavior was the foundation of her success, she had been unable to make any changes, even though some aspects of that behavior were problematic. As soon as she named her belief, however, she and David were able to take a more systematic look at how it was interfering in her life.

After spending some time simply paying attention to the way her belief worked in her life, Jeanne was ready for the third step—looking for any evidence that might cast even a small amount of doubt on her assumption. She recalled the times she had been compelled to take time off from work—for an illness, for example—and realized that her world had not fallen apart nor had she lost all that she had worked so hard to attain.

The fourth step in Kegan's approach is to go back and look for the roots of our beliefs and try to identify where and when they first began to operate in our lives. Jeanne discovered that her belief came from being one of many children in her family, performing unexceptionally in elementary and high school, and attending a middle-of-the-road state university. Once at the university, she began to push herself hard and found that she could excel. She had continued to push herself ever since.

For the fifth step, Kegan recommends constructing small tests of our assumptions or beliefs, trying to see how our experiences and actions might be different if they were based on different assumptions or beliefs about the world. The shift from Subject (something that is assumed or unexamined)

to Object (something that is reflected on and that therefore can be changed) may sound like a small change, but it can open up many new opportunities for the client.

One of the most powerful interventions coaches can provide is simply to help keep critical insights alive for their clients in order to support the movement of a belief from Subject to Object. Without both internal willingness and external support, any insight can quickly become Subject again.

For Jeanne, the Subject–Object shift did not mean that she gained complete control of her world and established an optimal life/work balance. She still thinks of herself as a driven person. But she has realized that she doesn't have to keep such a vigilant watch over things, that she can take time off for a vacation and not worry about job security, and that enjoying her personal life isn't the end of her professional life. She may always work hard, but she now feels more in control of the pace of her work life and less at risk of burning out.

Orders of Mind

In addition to describing the *process* of movement (from Subject to Object), Kegan's theory also describes qualitatively different *stages*—or Orders—along the developmental journey.

The Theory

The most profound example of a move from Subject to Object is when the entire meaning-making system moves from that which unquestioningly runs the person involved to that which the person can actively control. The slow but measurable¹ shift of entire systems from Subject to Object is what gives form to different Orders of mind in Kegan's theory. These Orders involve five ways of constructing reality, ranging from the way of a two-year-old to that of a person well into the second half of life.² Each Order represents a qualitative shift in meaning making and complexity from the Order preceding it. In moving from one Order to the next, we do not give up what we've already learned; we transform our relationship to it, moving it from the lens through which we see to one among several possible alternatives to be seen and acted on.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the Orders is that, although they become more complex with time, no Order is inherently better than any other (just as a more complex idea isn't necessarily more valuable than a simple one). Our clients can be kind or unkind, just or unjust, moral or immoral while they are at any of these Orders; it is impossible to measure a person's worth—or judge his or her satisfaction with his or her life—by looking at that person's Order of mind. What is more important is the *fit* between the Order of mind and the tasks required of each person.

The five Orders of mind are described briefly below; note especially the ones at which the majority of adults spend most of their lives—the Third and Fourth Orders of mind.

The First Order

Kegan's First Order is made up almost entirely of young children. Executive coaches do not work with those who inhabit this Order, but it serves as a useful reference point because the differences between this world and the others are so easy to see.

People in this Order cannot yet hold the idea that things in the world retain the same qualities over time. They believe they can slip down the bathtub drain because they can't hold themselves as different from the water that slips away. The First Order is a time of magic and mystery, with the world changing inexplicably from moment to moment.

The Second Order

Kegan's Second Order was once thought to belong exclusively to older children and young adolescents, but there is increasing evidence that adults can spend many years here as well. Therefore, while it is unlikely that executives are still operating at this Order of mind, at least some people in their organizations probably live in this world.

When people learn that objects stay the same regardless of their own relationship to them (when I walk away from the car, it looks smaller, but it isn't actually shrinking), their world becomes less magical and more complex. They discover that their beliefs and feelings also remain constant over time (I love chocolate but hate mashed potatoes; I'm good at math even if I can't do this problem). This insight helps them understand that other people have feelings and beliefs that remain constant, too. Second Order children—and adults—are self-centered and see others as helpers or barriers on

the road to attaining their desires. If they do not break rules, it's because they are afraid of being caught; when friends don't lie to each other, it's because they fear retaliation.

The Third Order

People can begin to enter the Third Order during adolescence, and there is a great deal of evidence that they can live much or all of their lives in this Order. Studies have shown that a surprisingly large percentage of adults—of all ages, occupations, and socioeconomic classes—inhabit this world (Kegan, 1994, pp. 192–195).

At the Third Order, people no longer see others as simply a means to an end; they have internalized one or more systems of meaning (their family's values, a political or national ideology, a professional or organizational culture). They have developed the ability to subordinate their desires and be guided by the norms and standards of their meaning system(s). Their impulses and desires, which were Subject to them in the Second Order, have become Object. They now internalize the ideas or emotions of others who represent their meaning system and are guided by the ideologies, institutions, or people that are most important to them. They are able to think abstractly, are self-reflective about their actions and the actions of others, and are devoted to something that's greater than their own needs. It is as if, in their growth from the Second Order, those at the Third Order have welcomed a board of directors into their decision making and now have the ideas or voices of important others with them as they make their decisions.

The major limitation of this Order shows up when there is a conflict between important ideologies, institutions, or people. At such times, people at the Third Order feel torn in two and cannot find a way to make a decision. If, for example, someone at the Third Order has internalized—and really believes—some of the culture of his organization (e.g., that levels of power should be collapsed and managers should consult with their staff about decisions) and has also internalized the ideology of his culture (e.g., that consulting with others shows that you do not know the answers yourself and is a sign of weakness), he will feel stuck when it comes to making decisions the Right Way. The person may turn to others to tell him how to best resolve the conflict and will become increasingly bewildered if there is no consensus about the resolution or if others counsel him to decide independently, saying that there is no Right Answer.

Because life often requires us to mediate between different ideologies, institutions, and/or key people in our lives, Kegan suggests that many people in the Third Order feel “in over their heads” much of the time. It is important to remember, though, that the Third Order is not a personality flaw to be corrected with appropriate intervention; it is a necessary point on a developmental continuum. Executive coaches who recognize this can have a vastly different perspective on their clients who are at the Third Order, as well as a more extensive set of tools with which to support them and their development.

The Fourth Order

The Fourth Order seems most familiar to those who work with adults because it is the Order that most closely resembles our modern image of the way adults are *supposed* to be. The most surprising thing about this Order, in fact, is that there are so many adults who have not yet reached this level of complexity.

Adults at the Fourth Order have achieved all that those at the Third Order have, and, in addition, they have created a *self* that exists even outside of its connection to the meaning systems and people surrounding it. The perspectives, opinions, and desires of the meaning systems they have adopted, which had great control over them when they were making meaning at the Third Order, are now Object to them. These individuals are able to examine and mediate among the various rule systems and opinions. The board of directors that was welcomed in the Third Order now undergoes a startling transformation. While the voices and ideas of important others are still internalized at the Fourth Order as they were in the Third Order, the great achievement of the Fourth Order is that the individual becomes the chairperson of the board.

Those at the Fourth Order have an internal set of rules and regulations—a self-governing system—that they use to make decisions and mediate conflicts. Unlike those at the Second Order, people at the Fourth Order feel empathy for others and take their wishes and opinions into consideration when making decisions. Unlike those at the Third Order, Fourth Order adults don’t feel torn apart by the conflicts of different meaning systems because they have their own system within which to make decisions. These are the people we read about in the literature who “own” their work and are self-guided, self-motivated, and self-evaluative.

The Fifth Order

Kegan's Fifth Order is never seen before midlife, and then only rarely. Even though it is not commonly seen in the general population, this Order is important to our work because many senior executives are at midlife or beyond, and many of them may be developing toward the Fifth Order.

Adults at the Fifth Order have achieved all that those at the Fourth Order have, and, in addition, they have learned the limits of their inner system—and the limits of having an inner system in general. Instead of viewing others as people with separate and different inner systems, those at the Fifth Order can look across inner systems to see the similarities hidden within what previously looked like differences. Adults at the Fifth Order are less likely to see the world in terms of dichotomies or polarities. They are more likely to understand and deal well with paradox and with managing the tension of opposites. They are also more likely to believe that what we often think of as black and white are just various shades of gray whose differences are made more visible by the lighter or darker colors around them. While they still make use of their Fourth Order board of directors, people at the Fifth Order recognize its inherent frailties. They are more likely to consider the advantages not just of other opinions (which the board might entertain) but of entirely different forms of governing systems. For example, they may realize that their internal system itself contributes to their inability to perceive a wide field of alternatives.

A Historical Analogy for Orders of Mind

According to Kegan (1994), societal demands made at different points in human history are helpful for understanding the different Orders of mind and grasping why so many of us are now in over our heads—not yet developmentally ready to meet the demands placed on us. Kegan explores three historical eras—traditionalism, modernism, and postmodernism—and relates them to the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Orders, respectively. While it is clear that these societal eras are useful mostly as a developmental analogy, it's enlightening to look at the society at large and see how it makes demands on its citizens.

Traditionalism

Traditionalism has been the typical form of society around the world for much of human history. This society requires loyalty to the group and the

ability to put the needs of the group before the needs of the self. People in traditional societies tend to live in the same place for long periods of time (perhaps even generations) with people who are similar (from the same tribe, religion, nationality, socioeconomic background). Leaders who espouse their society's ideologies (religious or philosophical leaders, doctors or healers, political leaders, leaders in the workplace) are part of their group. Members of this society look to these leaders or to other representations of the external theology or philosophies (scholarly or religious texts, for example) for the Right Answers to all kinds of problems. These leaders have the authority to help people raise their children, heal their sick, do their jobs, and live their lives by setting out a right action and right belief that others can confidently follow. For the most part, the demands of this society are suited to adults at the Third Order.

Modernism

The modern era began when people became more mobile and society was transformed from small, relatively homogeneous groups to larger, more diverse groups. Instead of belonging to and being committed to a small group, people in modern societies focus on Big Ideas—Science, Democracy, Freedom, Truth. No longer tied down to a single place or job, people move around more and are exposed to new ideas and to different kinds of people.

With the increase in diversity, as well as the increase in communication, group leaders are harder to identify—one of many competing doctors? one of a variety of religious leaders? one of the increasingly mistrusted political leaders? It is also less clear what to do when those leaders disagree. There is general disillusionment with external leaders and so-called heroes because these leaders and heroes are soon shown to be the flawed human beings they are. Because people in modern societies don't have leaders whom they trust, they must turn to other sources of wisdom on raising children, doing their jobs, and being citizens.

In this era, employers demand that people own their own work, become self-motivated, make their own decisions. The self-help section of bookstores continues to expand as people search for guidance. Individuals at the Fourth Order (less than half of all adults) are well suited to the demands of the modern age. The rest of us are in over our heads.

Postmodernism

Some say Postmodernism is here now, but others insist we're still firmly in a modernist world. Those who argue for postmodernism say that the Big

Ideas have failed us, that Truth doesn't exist. Rejecting both the old tribal systems and the search for Big Ideas, postmodern society fosters an awareness that we all belong to greater systems that are linked to one another and to this planet in important ways.

Instead of being enmeshed in a particular philosophy or ideology (which, at the Third Order or in traditional societies might come from external sources, and in the Fourth Order or in more modern societies might be self-constructed), those who exist in a postmodern manner can draw from many philosophies and ideologies, seeing the strengths and weaknesses inherent in all of them or in ideologies in general. They no longer seek to perfect a philosophy or idea; instead, postmodernists look at the ways in which dichotomous philosophies create one another and focus on the system that underlies the dichotomies. The very few who are at the Fifth Order are well suited to the demands of the postmodern age. Thus, in a postmodern world almost all of us are in over our heads.

Implications for Practice

We are still in an early stage in applying an understanding of Kegan's Orders of mind to executive coaching practice. However, we believe that the following observations are relevant to executive coaching:

- The amount of complexity executive roles require is variable.
- The amount of complexity executive roles require is probably increasing.
- The match between an executive's complexity of mind and the requirements of his or her role is critical for both effectiveness and job satisfaction.
- Development requires both challenge and support.

Each observation is discussed below.

The Amount of Complexity Executive Roles Require Is Variable

The complexity of mind an executive role requires is influenced by a number of factors, including the following:

- The characteristics of the role (the kinds of data that need to be gathered and grasped; the kinds of decisions that need to be made; the kinds of relationships that need to be developed; the clarity of objectives; the amount and nature of conflict to manage)

- The expectations regarding coordinated versus independent judgment and action (the amount of consultation and collaboration for decision making that is expected and considered acceptable by bosses, peers, and others; the degree of independence of thought and action that is expected and considered acceptable by bosses, peers, and others)
- The nature of the support provided by the executive's environment (the extent to which the policies, practices, and traditions of the organization provide adequate guidance to the executives; the amount of support for decision making provided by bosses, peers, and others)

We have developed three working hypotheses about the required complexity of mind in executive jobs:

- At a minimum, executive jobs require Third Order meaning making.
- Most executive jobs require Fourth Order meaning making.
- As executives develop beyond the Fourth Order, they may have the capacity to make additional and/or unique contributions to their organizations, but they may feel constrained by and/or dissatisfied with the nature and definition of many executive roles. Moreover, their additional and/or unique contributions may be invisible and undiscussable.

The Amount of Complexity Executive Roles Require Is Probably Increasing

There are a number of trends within organizations and marketplaces that are likely to lead to higher requirements for complexity in executives. These include

- An increase in the occurrence and speed of change
- An increase in the span of control of executives, which results in less time and attention for supporting their direct reports
- Greater ambiguity and uncertainty in decision making
- Less focus within many organizations on tradition and continuity in management and executive careers

The Match between Complexity and Role Requirements Is Critical

The match between an executive's complexity of mind and the requirements of her role is critical for both effectiveness and job satisfaction. A role will be a poor match when it requires an Order of complexity that is higher or lower than the executive's capability.

When the role is over the head of the executive, she is likely to feel overwhelmed and inadequate. Executives often respond by trying harder; working longer hours; and using all the skills, abilities, and resources at their command in an attempt to meet the expectations of the role. If the issue is a mismatch in complexity, however, additional effort is unlikely to be successful. (See pages 48 through 52 for suggestions about coaching executives who are in over their heads.)

When the role requires less complexity than the executive is capable of, the executive may be perceived as effective and successful but over time may begin to feel underutilized and unchallenged. A growing but often vague sense of dissatisfaction and frustration may occur, which can be difficult for both the executive and the organization to understand and resolve. (See pages 52 through 56 for suggestions about coaching executives who have outgrown their roles.)

Development Requires Both Challenge and Support

Development is difficult, so people tend not to develop unless they are challenged in some way. Such challenges are presented by anything that prompts us to question whatever we take for granted. Some are self-created (moving to or spending time in another country, changing careers, going back to school as an adult, going into therapy); others result from external events (being fired, being promoted to a more complex position, losing a parent or spouse, going through a long illness). None of these events or situations causes development; in fact, it is quite possible to engage in nearly all these events without developing at all. Challenges such as those described will be experienced differently by different people and by those at different Orders of mind. Yet each new challenge, as long as it is combined with support, makes development possible.

Support is also a necessary ingredient in development. Because development can be filled with uncertainty and discomfort, people tend to slip back

into more comfortable roles and ways of thinking—at least at first. Supporting people in their new ways of experiencing the world can help them hold on to the developmental aspects of these experiences and test their previous assumptions about the way the world works. Support, like challenge, can come from many different places (and people at different Orders of mind will probably be supported by different things). In a perfect world, each challenge would come with its own kind of support. In reality, however, people often have to be resourceful—and perhaps lucky—to get support that matches the challenges they are facing. For example, someone who gets a promotion at work—but not the necessary support on the job—could seek coaching to deal with the new challenges.

Strategies for Supporting the Performance and Development of Clients at Different Orders of Mind

Different executive coaching strategies may be appropriate for different situations:

- When there is a reasonably good fit between the complexity of mind of the executive and his or her role and environment
- When the executive's complexity is less than that required by his or her role or environment
- When the executive's complexity is greater than that required by his or her role or environment

Before describing possible strategies to use in these three circumstances, we offer a note of caution. In our view, it is never appropriate for an executive coach to insist that a client develop in a particular direction or manner or even that he or she develop at all. While development may have some advantages for a client, it also invariably comes, as mentioned earlier, at a cost. The executive coaching approaches we present here illustrate interventions we have found to be useful to clients in circumstances similar to the ones described. These interventions were developed to respond to dilemmas and concerns that the clients brought to the coaching relationship and were not imposed on clients because of our attachment to this, or any other, theory.

Additionally, we don't believe that this—or any other—chapter on Kegan's theory will enable anyone to determine a client's Order of mind; such determination requires the administration of a Subject–Object

Interview (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, and Felix, 1988). Our intent in this section is to offer a sufficiently clear view of the Orders of mind so that the patterns we describe are illuminated in a new way, allowing coaches to see new solutions to old concerns. We have used this theory to build tools with which to help executives be more effective and happier in their positions—not to diagnose or label them.

When There Is a Good Fit between Complexity and Role

When there is a reasonably good fit between an executive's complexity of mind and his or her role and environment, an executive coach can look for opportunities to support the executive's development in a way that enables him or her to take on more complex challenges. Because the developmental issues around complexity of mind are different at different Orders of mind, this section addresses separately the strategies for supporting development in Third Order clients and in Fourth Order clients. For each, a description of the key developmental issues involving complexity of mind and strategies for executive coaching are discussed.

Supporting Development in Third Order Clients The key developmental issue in moving from the Third Order to the Fourth is the development of a self-authored system: the appointment of the individual as chairperson of his internal board of directors. Before the executive can begin to listen to and trust his internal guide, he first needs to recognize the limitations of the meaning systems—the external guides—on which he has relied thus far. The executive discovers that the internalized voices of external ideologies, institutions, or people cannot make all of his decisions; this may become especially clear when two important others disagree. Over time, the person learns to pay attention to and trust his own emerging voice. As mentioned earlier, a move to the Fourth Order doesn't mean that a person has abandoned key meaning systems—it reflects instead an ability to mediate across meaning systems.

An executive coach can support the development of a Third Order executive by

- Giving the executive opportunities to explore his view of critical events and issues, by asking questions such as What did *you* observe, think, feel? What's most important to *you* in the situation? What would *you* prefer to have happened?

- Noticing and pointing out even subtle differences between the executive's perspective or reaction and that of another person (a boss, a peer). For example, the coach might say, "So your boss thought Joe was out of line, but you thought Joe had some good points—although you agree with your boss that Joe's timing was a problem."
- Exploring with the executive relevant aspects of his key meaning systems (the values of his family, ethnic group, or religion); the perspectives of his profession (law, economics); the assumptions and implicit code of conduct of his organization
- Paying particular attention to issues and situations in which key meaning systems disagree and helping the executive develop strategies for mediating such disagreements
- Recommending activities that can help the executive identify his own views (journaling, taking time off alone for reflection)
- Using psychological instruments, such as the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*[®] instrument, that portray individual differences as normal and natural and that support a differentiated approach to individual perspectives, interests, and reactions
- Helping the executive identify bosses, peers, and others who are especially good at articulating an independent perspective while taking into account the organization's culture and brainstorming about ways to observe and interact with bosses, peers, and others

Supporting Development in Fourth Order Clients In moving from the Third Order to the Fourth, the challenge is to *question the infallibility of external guides* and learn to trust the internal, self-authored guide. In the move from the Fourth Order to the Fifth, in contrast, the key task for the client is to *question the infallibility of her self-authored system* and see the need to transcend her reliance on that system.

Just as those moving from the Third Order to the Fourth retain the internalized voices of others as they develop their own voice, those moving from the Fourth Order to the Fifth retain their own self-authored system even as they recognize the need to link their system with those of others. Now, instead of having a hierarchical board of directors with herself as chair, the emerging Fifth Order executive might search for new metaphors. She might

work to see herself as a member of a council of elders, for example, with each member representing his or her own internal and external constituencies and *at the same time* listening to the ways other council members shape and create the available options.

One of the most valuable ways in which a coach can support a client's movement from the Fourth Order to the Fifth is to make note of any thinking and behavior that demonstrate increasing complexity, as well as any positive effects of such thinking or behavior. The transition to Fifth Order might manifest itself in an executive in an increased ability to

- Understand and integrate the perspectives of other people and/or groups: *We've always dismissed that view of things, but I can see now why it looks that way to them.*
- Integrate apparent opposites: *I told them we weren't going to announce a solution until we had one that provided some structure and closure so that ____ can do their job, but that also has flexibility for our staff and our customers.*
- Take a fresh look at taboos or undiscussable issues: *The practice in my profession has always been ____ , but I'm beginning to see that we need to rethink our approach.*
- Tolerate contradictions (in themselves or their work) instead of denying, ignoring, or trying to fix them: *I always thought I was one of the good guys, but I'm beginning to see that what I always held as my altruism is really another form of selfishness.*
- Demonstrate awareness of their own meaning systems: *I'm increasingly recognizing that my training as a lawyer has accustomed me to see things in adversarial terms, which in this case has caused some real difficulty for the project.*
- Make connections across levels: *As I was listening to the two sides argue at the meeting, I was struck by the fact that I have some of those same arguments inside my head and that I sometimes feel both ways about that issue at the same time.*
- See the influence of their mind-set and expectations on their view of reality: *I realize that I went in there determined to see them as the bad guys and my expectations helped lead us to an impasse.*

When appropriate, executive coaches can highlight and reinforce such examples of increasing complexity and can discuss with clients their implications and potential positive effects on the organization.

As clients become more complex, they may begin to voice somewhat vague concerns about the inadequacy of processes and practices with which they previously had been comfortable: *I know we've always done it that way, but I'm starting to see more of the downsides.*

Executive coaches can help clients articulate what seems to be lacking and brainstorm about alternative approaches. Coaches also can help normalize the situation for clients, as clients often feel torn about their criticisms. Their sense of the inadequacy of the process or practice in question may be strong and insistent, while at the same time they may feel that they are being unreasonable, overly critical, even harsh: *I'm sure they're thinking, "How come he's so picky all of a sudden?" And it's not as if I have a lot of great ideas about how to change things. I don't blame them—I don't like it when people just criticize and don't offer solutions.*

When the Executive's Complexity Is Less Than Required

There are, of course, times when executives are themselves in over their heads as their jobs require more complex ways of making meaning than they possess. This can happen to Third Order clients whose roles have Fourth Order expectations as well as to Fourth Order clients whose roles have Fifth Order expectations.

Supporting Third Order Clients Whose Roles Have Fourth Order Expectations Executive coaching clients can be in over their heads when the expectations they face from their boss, peers, staff, organization, or others are that they be able to make meaning at the Fourth Order (that is, that they be self-authoring) when their level of complexity—like that of much of the adult population—is at the Third Order.³ For example, changing jobs can create strain for Third Order executives by increasing the level of complexity expected or decreasing the available support. Such job changes can involve promotions, changes in scope and scale, and a move from a more structured to a more ambiguous part of an organization.

Third Order executives can experience similar dilemmas due to a change in the nature of or circumstances surrounding a current job, such as getting a new boss. We have seen clients who were very successful under one boss struggle and even fail under another boss who wanted the client to take

more ownership of the process. In addition, changes in an organization resulting from mergers, reorganizations, transitions in top management, strategy redirection, or technological changes can disrupt a work setting that has provided a sense of coherence and clarity about roles, relationships, work practices, and operating procedures, thus creating challenges for Third Order executives.

A Third Order executive who faces Fourth Order expectations is likely to feel overwhelmed, strained, and uncertain. He may have excellent skills and a great capacity to respond to the demands of a situation. However, the Fourth Order requirement typically involves not just *meeting the demands* but also *identifying and deciding among them*—in essence *choosing* the demands. Third Order executives in this situation are likely to try in a variety of ways to get clarity (from their bosses or others) about what they and their part of the organization should be doing, and they may feel intensely frustrated and confused when the message comes back as some form of “You decide.” They may expend a great deal of effort trying to get results and be successful, and they may experience heightened confusion and anxiety when their hard work doesn’t pay off, sensing that somehow they’re not getting it. They can become resentful of their bosses and other people in authority for not providing enough direction, for being vague and unclear about what they want.

Bosses and others in the environment who are expecting Fourth Order meaning making (usually without being aware of the real nature of their expectations) may interpret the executives’ behavior as indecisive, risk-averse, dependent on authority. They may give messages, directly or indirectly, that say in effect

- *Take some initiative.*
- *Don’t be so dependent on others.*
- *Why are you unwilling (or afraid or unable) to decide?*

Conversations across Third Order–Fourth Order differences can lead to increasing frustration on both sides. A Third Order client might complain, *I don’t know what she wants and whenever I try to get some clarity, she’s elusive (or not helpful or vague or dismissive)*. A Fourth Order boss might assert, *I can’t figure out why he isn’t getting on top of his assignment. He’s a smart guy—it’s not asking that much for him to take the initiative and start things moving.*

An executive coach can support a Third Order executive who is facing Fourth Order demands by

- Helping to identify and articulate the expectations that are causing strain and confusion
- Brainstorming with the executive about sources of information, expertise, and judgment that might support the executive's decision making; these sources might involve people (peers, subordinates, experts) or frameworks, policies, or research
- Helping the executive craft an explicit decision-making process that can be used (with helpful resources) to make difficult decisions
- Proposing ways to have constructive discussions with bosses, peers, and others
- Reframing the situation as a valuable developmental opportunity

Supporting Fourth Order Clients Whose Roles Have Fifth Order Expectations Executive coaching clients can be in over their heads even when they meet the modernist expectations of complexity—the Fourth Order—if their role and environment require meaning making that goes beyond the Fourth Order. The same kinds of events (a job change or a change in the circumstances surrounding a current job) that lead Third Order clients to be strained and overwhelmed can affect Fourth Order clients. A new role that requires an executive not simply to deal with but to really integrate a wider range of perspectives or to demonstrate substantial subtlety and flexibility in mediating among different constituencies or domains (e.g., economics, law, and diplomacy) can be experienced as overwhelming or even impossible by a Fourth Order executive. A new boss or changing organizational circumstance (e.g., a merger) that requires these or similar capabilities could also lead to an executive's being in over his or her head.

Fourth Order executives who face Fifth Order expectations are likely to feel frustrated. It may be very clear to them what needs to be done and, when a suggestion is made about integrating other perspectives or kinds of considerations, they may be defensive (“I know what they want and I've considered their views in my decision”) or stymied (“I've come up with a plan that takes all the factors into account, but my boss seems to think I'm not going far enough in understanding and representing all the different

views. I don't see how anyone could go farther than I have in giving people what they want").

Fourth Order executives are likely to try to explain the coherence and logic of their decision making and to be frustrated or even angry when their logic is not seen as sufficient or perhaps is not even engaged with. They may struggle to find a better, more finely tuned internal system that allows them to have a better grasp of the situation. They may not realize, however, that what is needed isn't a better system, but rather an awareness that no single system is complex enough to deal with the circumstances.

Bosses and others in the environment who are expecting Fifth Order meaning making from a Fourth Order executive may see the executive as arrogant, too cut-and-dried, and/or unable to reach beyond her own way of thinking. Interactions can have a broken-record quality, with the executive reiterating the underpinnings of her approach and others continuing to suggest that she include other perspectives in her thinking and decision making.

An executive coach can help a Fourth Order client who is facing Fifth Order expectations by

- Helping her enhance her ability to understand the relationship between her own system and the systems of others (see Chapter 6 for strategies for helping clients increase their perspective-taking ability)
- Reviewing with her conversations she has had that were unsatisfying and looking for opportunities to reframe others' perspectives and reinterpret interactions with others such that the executive can see those different perspectives as ones that she holds—at least a little bit—as well
- Helping the executive see that even belief systems that are very different from hers can have their own admirable internal coherence; the experience of being able to admire the coherence of another's system while holding an awareness of the deficiencies of that system may increase the executive's ability to understand both the strengths and the limitations of her own system and ultimately to see that any one system is limited
- Looking for circumstances—however minor or peripheral to the points that are in contention—in which she can identify with or

admire another system of meaning making, especially when it is very different from her own

- Encouraging her to identify peers or bosses who are especially effective in mediating across different perspectives or domains and then to find opportunities to interact with or observe such people in action
- Reinforcing that the process of growth and discovery, however difficult, is a valuable one that will enhance other skills and add important competence for future, more complex roles
- Supporting her in managing her frustration (and perhaps anger) and maintaining a sense of equilibrium and patience with the process

When the Executive's Complexity Is Greater Than Required

A different set of dilemmas are created and different opportunities for executive coaching are presented when executives have developed beyond what is expected in their roles. This can happen in Fourth Order clients whose roles have Third Order expectations as well as in Fifth Order clients whose roles have Fourth Order expectations.⁴

Supporting Fourth Order Clients Whose Roles Have Third Order Expectations Fourth Order executives can encounter Third Order expectations either when they develop and therefore outgrow their roles or their parts of the organization or when their jobs or the circumstances surrounding their jobs change. In the latter case, a change in bosses, a move to a more tradition-based part of an organization, or an organizational change that results in a more constrained, rule-bound, or “back-to-basics” approach can result in placing Fourth Order executives into Third Order roles and environments.

Fourth Order executives in Third Order environments are likely to feel constrained, controlled, and frustrated. They may experience a lack of freedom to act and make decisions, and may feel that they are being prevented from exercising their own judgment and being successful in their own way. In such circumstances, executives may consciously try to exercise self-control to hide their discomfort and frustration. They may go underground with their initiative and work around the rules so that they can feel at least somewhat in charge of the situation. They may drop out psychologically

and go through the motions of the job, while seeking satisfaction in other parts of their lives. They are likely to feel stuck, sensing that they've lost any forward momentum in their development, or even feel that they're slipping backward in their capacities and achievements.

A boss with Third Order expectations may experience a Fourth Order subordinate as insufficiently respectful of authority and/or tradition, as an upstart, as undisciplined, or even as insubordinate. Concerns can be expressed in the following ways:

- *He's a capable guy, but he's not with the program.*
- *She thinks she can just make up her own rules.*
- *I don't know what he wants—I've given him a lot of responsibility, but he's always complaining that he doesn't have enough authority to really take the initiative.*

Interactions between the executive and others can be strained, with each side seeing the other's expectations and behavior as off-base, offensive, or even outrageous. Unless there is a compelling reason to stay (intense commitment to the mission, a skill or knowledge base that can't be attained elsewhere, great attachment to the people involved, extraordinarily unattractive alternatives), Fourth Order executives will often do whatever they can to leave Third Order environments as soon as possible because being there is so uncomfortable and unsatisfying.

An executive coach can support a Fourth Order executive who is facing Third Order demands by

- Supporting the executive in describing and understanding the situation, the issues the situation raises for him, and his reactions to various aspects of the situation
- Brainstorming with the executive about language that supports the rules but makes a case for an exception and about actions that allow independence of thought and action but aren't seen as insubordinate
- Helping the executive identify and avoid specific settings and events (e.g., awards ceremonies) that are particularly frustrating, demotivating, or offensive
- Brainstorming with the executive about ways to increase his freedom of action (e.g., by taking on leading-edge assignments or engaging in cross-functional projects)

- Encouraging the executive to identify and try to expand the more satisfying parts of the job (e.g., mentoring staff, working with customers, learning a new skill or knowledge base)
- Proposing ways to continue growing and developing, both within and outside of the job, to counteract the sense of being stuck or regressing
- Helping to manage the frustration that stems from the situation and providing an outlet for the executive to express his negative reactions or feelings
- Supporting the executive in articulating the kind of role or environment that would be a better fit and in seeking to find and move toward that role or environment

Supporting Fifth Order Clients Whose Roles Have Fourth Order Expectations As discussed previously, modern expectations for adults involve Fourth Order meaning making; Fifth Order meaning making is far less common and far more difficult to understand or describe. As a result, executives who develop past the Fourth Order are likely to operate in roles and environments that are primarily Third and Fourth Order. Exceptions are roles and environments in which a leader is highly developed and over time both supports and calls for post-Fourth Order development or in which the work is particularly complex, requiring, for example, mediation across different perspectives and domains.

When an executive grows in complexity of mind beyond the Fourth Order, she begins to develop perspectives and capacities that are elusive and that are mostly undiscussable—because we do not have adequate language to talk about Fifth Order phenomena—and invisible—because the sensibilities and capacities of the Fifth Order are *Subject* to the vast majority of people.

Post-Fourth Order perspectives and capacities may enable the executive to make unique contributions to her organization (e.g., by dealing with diverse perspectives or by crafting solutions that integrate apparent opposites). However, the executive may find the environment narrow and constraining and may feel that there is a lack of understanding and recognition of her most developed—and most interesting—capabilities. As a result, there can be a tension between a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment

and a subtle dissatisfaction or discomfort with not really being heard or understood, in all of the executive's developing complexity. The executive may experience others as too cut-and-dried in their views and as lacking in flexibility, subtlety, or depth.

- *It's not as simple as my boss (or peer) thinks.*
- *They don't see the limitations of their perspectives.*
- *I basically agree with them, but there's somehow more to it.*

Others in the executive's environment may see him or her as capable, but may think that he or she sometimes makes things too complicated.

- *He's not always good at laying down the law about things—he listens too much sometimes to ____.*
- *The solution is really simple—why does she always have to make things so complicated?*

Others may also sense a vague unhappiness or dissatisfaction.

- *She's hard to please sometimes. I've given her a lot of recognition, but she still doesn't seem very happy with my response to her work.*
- *I'm trying to be supportive, but I can't figure out what he really wants.*

An executive coach can support a Fifth Order executive who operates in a Fourth Order role or environment by

- Supporting the executive in articulating the dilemmas and dissatisfaction she may be experiencing
- Brainstorming with the executive about aspects of his or her current role or about possible new assignments that might be rewarding and could contribute to her development
- Helping the executive accept that there may be things that the boss (or peers) may never really understand or appreciate and lower her expectations for such understanding and appreciation
- Supporting the executive in identifying the ways in which she would love to develop, as well as specific strategies for pursuing that development
- Encouraging the executive to develop or expand a “kitchen cabinet” of diverse, wise colleagues, former bosses, and others that will support her development

- Brainstorming with the executive about ways to explain, frame, or justify post–Fourth Order perspectives, approaches, and achievements in ways that are persuasive and accessible in a Fourth Order environment
- Highlighting the developmental nature of the dilemmas and dissatisfactions she has been experiencing, as well as the value of possible future contributions based on her ongoing development

Conclusion

In previous centuries, adults thought of children as little adults—people who could understand and interact with the world in the same way adults could as soon as their physical capacities were mature enough. As researchers and teachers discovered more and more about the internal worlds of children, they were able to create environments far more supportive of the growth and development of those children. Similarly, people often think of adults as being generally all the same developmentally—with differences in skills or intelligence. While such variables as skills and intelligence are clearly important, we believe that understanding the different worlds adults inhabit is a key factor in helping them be more successful and effective in their work. The constructive-developmental theory of Robert Kegan offers shape to these worlds, and this chapter has attempted to apply Kegan’s theory to the evolving field of executive coaching. Our hope is that executive coaching that is informed by Kegan’s theory can help both leaders and their organizations be more effective.

Notes

¹ Order of mind can be measured by the Subject–Object Interview (SOI; Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, and Felix, 1988). This measure, an intense, hour-long qualitative interview administered, transcribed, and scored by a skilled practitioner, identifies the meaning-making system of the interviewee.

² This system actually begins at birth with babies and toddlers at a kind of Zero Order, which has its own way of constructing the world.

³ Actually, most of our lives are spent in the transitional spaces between the Orders. Kegan has identified four such places between each of the major poles (there are four poles between Third Order and the Fourth Order). Therefore, we may have many clients who are not yet *fully* Fourth Order who have characteristics of both Third and Fourth Order meaning-making systems.

⁴ Another caveat about the Fifth Order: In the following sections we'll talk about Fifth Order clients and also about Fourth Order clients in Fifth Order roles or environments. It is unlikely that there are many clients who are fully Fifth Order, and it is even less likely that any organizations have demands that are universally Fifth Order. What does seem likely is that there will be some clients who are beginning the journey toward the Fifth Order and there are some organizations that, because of their global orientation or diversity of ideas or complexity of missions, will have some Fifth Order demands.

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