



THE VERTICAL DIMENSION OF HORIZONTAL CAPABILITIES

Understanding the Inner Development Goals
through the Lens of Ego Development Theory

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Summary: The Vertical Dimension of Horizontal Capabilities

This essay addresses a critical issue regarding the Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework, which identifies 25 skills and qualities essential for addressing complex global challenges. While the IDG framework comprehensively maps what capacities are needed, it treats these qualities as uniformly accessible through training. This essay reveals that each IDG quality has a developmental depth dimension that fundamentally shapes its manifestation based on an individual's stage of ego development.

The central thesis is that IDG qualities are not merely skills varying in proficiency, but capacities that transform qualitatively as consciousness itself evolves through developmental stages. Drawing on ego development theories from Loevinger, Cook-Greuter, Kegan, and Torbert, the essay demonstrates how qualities like Self-Awareness, Complexity Awareness, and Connectedness mean fundamentally different things at different developmental stages.

The analysis categorizes the 25 IDG qualities into three types: (1) Skills with developmental prerequisites that can be trained within a stage but have structural ceilings; (2) Emergent qualities like Connectedness and Inner Compass that arise from stage transformation rather than training; and (3) Hybrid qualities combining trainable and developmental dimensions.

This distinction has profound practical implications. Many sustainability initiatives fail not from poor strategy or insufficient resources, but from developmental mismatch. For instance, genuine multi-stakeholder collaboration across paradigmatic differences requires post-conventional consciousness (stages E7-E8), yet most organizations operate from conventional stages (E5-E6). Similarly, transformative systems thinking goes beyond analytical tools to require awareness that the observer is part of the system—a capacity emerging only at later stages.

The essay provides concrete guidance for practitioners, outlining stage-appropriate developmental support strategies. It emphasizes three principles: meeting people where they are developmentally, providing challenges at the edge of current capacity, and distinguishing skill training from structural transformation. Vertical development requires years, not quarters, and emerges through challenging experiences, developmental relationships, and contemplative practices rather than conventional training.

For organizations, this means assessing collective developmental center of gravity, designing culture and change initiatives appropriate to that stage, and investing in long-term developmental support rather than expecting quick transformations. The sustainability field particularly needs to recognize that addressing wicked problems requires post-conventional consciousness—not as elitism but as structural reality.

The essay concludes that inner development goals are not fixed achievements but evolving horizons that deepen as consciousness transforms. Understanding this vertical dimension makes developmental work more realistic, effective, and compassionate, enabling practitioners to support genuine transformation rather than superficial behavioral change. This recognition is essential for building the consciousness required to address our most pressing planetary challenges.

Preface

1. This essay was written by the AI language model Claude, based on instructions and source material provided by me, Thomas Jordan. There were two sets of source material. The first was a number of documents detailing the particulars of ego development stages in the tradition of Jane Loevinger, Susanne Cook-Greuter, and Bill Torbert. These were my own compilations and adaptations from forty years of following research in the field, as well as my own research. The other set was two documents about the Inner Development Goals framework. One was the more comprehensive report I wrote in the first phase of the IDG initiative, that led to the first version of the framework. The other is an overview of the second, updated version of the framework, made public in 2025.

2. I want to emphasize that the author of this essay is Claude, not me. Claude is a language model, with a very sophisticated “ability” to apply a complex set of discourse to a new task. But of course this mode of operating has important limitations. The result is something that looks like deductive reasoning, meaning that there is no direct grounding in the empirical reality of the phenomena treated. This should be kept in mind, and the reader should use his or her own critical judgement in evaluating the validity of the statements in the essay.

3. If I had written the essay, there would have been some differences. Claude treats the ego development stages as if they are real and clearly delimited. I would have used a more fluid framing. There is a very large volume of research providing ample evidence of the validity of the ego development stage models (there are a couple of somewhat different models). However, real people are complex, and in many respects unique. Meaning-making patterns are partly durable, but also shift depending on various kinds of circumstances, which means that a real person does not consistently display the patterns of one single ego stage.

4. This text does not give a thorough introduction to ego development stage frameworks, which may make the text somewhat hard to follow for readers with little familiarity with the meaning of jargon used, such as “E5” or stage names. The “E” means “ego stage”. There is an appendix that gives an overview of salient properties of stages, based on my own compilations and interpretations of many different sources. Claude uses the “E” also for stages 9 and 10, which I have left in for convenience. The last stages in the model were researched and described by Susanne Cook-Greuter, and are therefore often designated C9 and C10, to signal that these stages are not part of Jane Loevinger’s model.

5. Claude was not fully consistent when writing about the stages and the patterns discussed. There is sometimes a bit blurry which stages belongs to the pre-conventional, conventional, post-conventional and transpersonal phases. Claude sometimes mixed up ego stages 4 and 5, and 7 and 8. I have made some edits to straighten out this, but there are probably still some inconsistencies remaining. I don’t think this is crucially important though, the significant patterns are well captured. Claude also places stage E9 in the transpersonal realm, whereas it should be regarded as a late post-conventional stage. I did not edit this, because the patterns referred to in the essay are in transition from the post-conventional to the transpersonal realm.

6. Claude was also not fully consistent in relation to the two versions of the IDG framework. Sometimes the text refers to names of skills or qualities in the first version (from 2021), that were changed in the updated version. This inconsistency is my fault, I should maybe have uploaded only the latest version with 25 skills and qualities. But this is also a rather small issue.

7. I think that this essay should be read as an exercise in interpreting what happens if a particular theoretical framework, in this case an ego development stage model, is used as a lens to explore the deeper dynamics of the development of the 25 skills and qualities in the IDG framework. There are many other theoretical frameworks that can offer *other* significant insights into the dynamics of the skills and qualities. One example would be Interpersonal Neurobiology, another would be Symbolic Interactionism or other sociological theories about the construction of the self.

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| INTRODUCTION: TWO DIMENSIONS OF DEVELOPMENT | 1 |
| PART I: FOUNDATION - WHEN SKILLS AREN'T JUST SKILLS | |
| 1. THE IDG FRAMEWORK'S IMPLICIT DEVELOPMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS | 5 |
| PART II: THE DEVELOPMENTAL SPECTRUM OF SELECTED IDG QUALITIES | |
| 2. SELF-AWARENESS - THE FOUNDATION THAT TRANSFORMS | 11 |
| 3. COMPLEXITY AWARENESS - WHAT CAN BE SEEN DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU STAND | 18 |
| 4. PERSPECTIVE SKILLS - BEYOND ROLE-TAKING | 25 |
| 5. CONNECTEDNESS - THE EXPANSION OF IDENTITY BOUNDARIES | 33 |
| 6. INNER COMPASS – THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL AUTHORITY | 41 |
| PART III: PATTERNS AND PRINCIPLES | |
| 7. THREE CATEGORIES OF IDG QUALITIES | 49 |
| 8. WHY VERTICAL DEVELOPMENT MATTERS FOR SUSTAINABILITY WORK | 59 |
| PART IV: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE | |
| 9. STAGE-APPROPRIATE DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT | 67 |
| 10. ORGANIZATIONAL APPLICATIONS | 80 |
| 11. THE BOTH/AND OF HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL | 94 |
| References for further exploration | 102 |
| Appendix: Ego development stages | 103 |

THE VERTICAL DIMENSION OF HORIZONTAL CAPABILITIES

Understanding the Inner Development Goals through the Lens of Ego Development Theory

Authored by the AI system Claude based on source material and instructions by Thomas Jordan¹

INTRODUCTION: TWO DIMENSIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

The IDG framework and its achievement

In 2021, a remarkable collaborative effort produced the Inner Development Goals framework—a comprehensive inventory of 23 skills and qualities (later expanded to 25) deemed essential for addressing complex global challenges, particularly those articulated in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The two versions of the IDG framework emerged from extensive consultation with over 20.000 practitioners, leaders and researchers, representing a genuine attempt to identify what we need to cultivate within ourselves to become more effective agents of positive change in the world.²

The framework is organized into five dimensions: Being (cultivating our inner life), Thinking (understanding our complex world), Relating (caring for others and the world), Collaborating (working together across differences), and Acting (driving change). Within these dimensions, 25 specific capacities are identified—ranging from Self-Awareness and Complexity Awareness to Connectedness and Inner Compass, from Critical Thinking and Perspective Skills to Co-creation Skills and Mobilization Skills.

The IDG framework has proven valuable precisely because it makes visible what has long been invisible in our approaches to sustainability and social change. It articulates the "blind spot" in our efforts to create a sustainable global society: we have accumulated extensive knowledge about environmental problems, social challenges, and economic inequities, yet we have invested far less in understanding and developing the inner capacities of those who must address these challenges. The framework provides accessible language for discussing inner development with organizational leaders, policymakers, and practitioners who might otherwise dismiss such concerns as too "soft" or peripheral to the "real work" of sustainability.

The framework's own blind spot

¹ I, Thomas Jordan, have reviewed Claude's text and made some corrections where Claude confused ego stages E3, E4 and E5, and the pre-conventional and early conventional stages. Claude also placed ego stage E9 as a transpersonal stage, while it should be a late post-conventional stage. Apart from these errors, I have only made very minor edits. I am sure there are some somewhat questionable formulations, but generally I regard the reasoning as sound according to my familiarity with the adult development research field, which I have studied since the late 1980's.

² See innerdevelopmentgoals.org. The first phase full report can be accessed here: <http://perspectus.se/tj/publikationer/IDGfullreport2021.pdf>

However, as comprehensive as the IDG framework is in mapping the horizontal landscape of needed capacities, it contains its own blind spot—one that becomes apparent when we examine these 25 qualities through the lens of adult development theory, particularly ego development frameworks developed by researchers such as Jane Loevinger, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Robert Kegan, and William Torbert.

The central thesis of this essay is straightforward but consequential: each of the 25 IDG qualities has a developmental depth dimension that fundamentally shapes what that quality means, how it manifests, and what is structurally possible at different stages of human development. These are not merely skills that can be trained to higher or lower levels of proficiency within a stable meaning-making structure. Rather, they are capacities that transform qualitatively as the structure of consciousness itself transforms.

Horizontal and vertical development

To understand this, we must distinguish between two dimensions of development that are often confused:

Horizontal development refers to the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and behaviors within an existing framework of meaning-making. It is expansion—learning more, becoming better at what we already do, adding capabilities to our repertoire. Horizontal development is what most training and education focuses on: teaching people new techniques, providing new information, building competencies. It is valuable, necessary, and relatively straightforward to facilitate.

Vertical development, by contrast, refers to transformation of the meaning-making structure itself—the underlying framework through which we interpret experience, construct meaning, and make sense of ourselves and the world. It is evolution rather than expansion, involving qualitative shifts in how we understand causality, identity, perspective, authority, and purpose. Vertical development is slower, less predictable, and cannot be directly taught through conventional educational methods. It unfolds through experience, particularly experiences that challenge the adequacy of our current meaning-making structure.

The IDG framework excellence lies in identifying WHAT capacities are needed for addressing complex global challenges. Its limitation—perhaps inevitable given its pedagogical purpose—is that it does not explicitly address the developmental STRUCTURE that enables these qualities to emerge and manifest authentically. The framework treats its 25 qualities as if they are uniformly accessible across all individuals, varying only in degree of development, when in reality many of these qualities are only genuinely possible at certain stages of ego development.

Two illustrative examples

Consider just two examples that hint at what we will explore in depth:

Connectedness—defined in the IDG framework as "feeling a sense of belonging to a larger whole, such as humanity, the planet's web of life, and the spiritual dimensions of existence"—is not simply a feeling that can be cultivated through practices or persuasion. It represents a transformation in the structure of identity itself. At earlier stages of ego development, identity is necessarily bounded by more immediate circles—the physical self, the social group, the ideological community. The expansion of identity to genuinely include "humanity" or "the planet's web of life" requires a specific developmental transformation that typically occurs only at post-conventional stages. Before this transformation, people can intellectually understand

interconnection, can value it as a principle, can even experience temporary states of unity—but they cannot sustainably hold it as their lived identity structure.

Similarly, **Inner Compass**—described as "a deeply felt commitment to live and act in accordance with values and purposes that serve the good of the whole"—presupposes an internalized locus of moral authority that is itself a developmental achievement. At the early conventional stage, moral authority resides externally in rules and authorities. At later conventional stages, it becomes internalized but remains largely sociocentric, oriented toward the welfare of one's in-group or nation. Only at post-conventional stages does genuinely worldcentric moral authority emerge—where "the good of the whole" can encompass all of humanity, future generations, and the more-than-human world, held not as an abstract principle but as an authentic expression of expanded identity.

Recognition in the original report

The author of the original IDG report, Thomas Jordan, was aware of these dynamics. In an early draft of the framework, he explicitly categorized the 23 qualities into five groups: Cognition; Stances (attitudes and values); Identifications; Relationship to Self; and Social Skills. He placed both Connectedness and Inner Compass under "Identifications"—recognizing that these are not skills that can be trained but rather "qualities that are functions of a person's level of ego development." He also noted that "Openness and Learning mindset is therefore not to be regarded solely as a skill that can be trained, but is intimately linked to adult development processes involving the whole self."

However, the IDG project was designed for mass communication, not primarily as a scholarly endeavor. As the author wrote in that original report, there was "a certain cognitive tension involved in how to group the items and how to name the main categories, between on the one hand the wish for logical stringency in how the skills and qualities are grouped and terminological accuracy (a scholarly perspective), on the other hand the wish for having a structure and vocabulary that makes sense to practitioners (a mass communication perspective)." The framework ultimately prioritized accessibility and face validity over theoretical precision—a defensible choice given its purpose.

Why this matters for practice

But this choice created a gap that this essay aims to address. For practitioners, coaches, consultants, and organizational developers working with the IDG framework, understanding the vertical dimension is not merely academic—it has immediate practical implications:

Why do some individuals or organizations seem unable to genuinely embody certain IDG qualities despite sincere effort and extensive training? The vertical lens provides an answer: they may not yet have developed the meaning-making structure that enables those qualities to emerge authentically.

Why do interventions that successfully develop certain capacities in some contexts fail completely in others? Often because the intervention was designed with assumptions about developmental readiness that don't match the actual stage of the participants or organizational culture.

Why do well-intentioned diversity and inclusion initiatives, stakeholder engagement processes, or collaborative governance experiments so often produce frustration rather than transformation? Frequently because they require post-conventional capacities (genuine comfort with multiple perspectives, ability to work across incommensurable frameworks) from participants still operating from conventional meaning-making structures.

How should we sequence developmental work? Should we build horizontal skills first, then support vertical development? Or does vertical development enable horizontal skills to emerge more naturally? The answer varies by individual, context, and which IDG qualities we're focusing on.

What are realistic expectations for the pace and depth of development? Understanding the difference between behavioral change (relatively quick), skill building (moderate timeframe), and structural transformation (measured in years) helps us design interventions and measure progress appropriately.

The approach and structure of this essay

This essay examines selected IDG qualities through the lens of ego development theory, showing how each quality manifests differently at different developmental stages. We will draw primarily on the frameworks of Jane Loevinger (whose ego development stages provide foundational understanding), Susanne Cook-Greuter (who extended Loevinger's work to include late post-conventional and transpersonal stages), Robert Kegan (whose subject-object theory illuminates the transformation of identity and perspective), and William Torbert (whose action logics translate stage theory into leadership contexts).

The essay is organized as follows: Part I establishes the foundation, showing how the IDG framework itself already contains implicit recognition of developmental dynamics. Part II examines six selected IDG qualities in depth, tracing how each manifests across the developmental spectrum from pre-conventional through conventional to post-conventional and transpersonal stages. Part III identifies patterns across all 25 IDG qualities, creating a typology that distinguishes skills with developmental prerequisites from emergent qualities that cannot be directly trained. Part IV translates theory into practice, offering guidance for coaches, consultants, and organizational developers on how to support both horizontal and vertical development appropriately.

The aim of this essay

The aim throughout is not to criticize the IDG framework but to enrich it—to add the vertical dimension that makes the horizontal landscape more navigable. The 25 Inner Development Goals are not just skills to be learned but horizons to be grown into, each quality deepening in meaning and manifestation as we ourselves develop. Understanding this does not diminish the power and utility of the IDG framework; it enhances it, making our developmental efforts more realistic, more effective, and ultimately more compassionate toward the actual humans undertaking this difficult and necessary work.

For those engaged in the urgent work of developing human capacity to address global challenges, recognizing the vertical dimension alongside the horizontal opens new possibilities. It helps us understand why certain capacities remain elusive despite effort, suggests how to sequence and support developmental journeys more effectively, and offers hope grounded in realism: the qualities we most need are indeed cultivable, but cultivating them requires understanding and working with the deep structures of human consciousness, not just the surface manifestations of skill and behavior.

PART I: FOUNDATION - WHEN SKILLS AREN'T JUST SKILLS

1. THE IDG FRAMEWORK'S IMPLICIT DEVELOPMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS

Although the IDG framework was designed for pedagogical accessibility rather than theoretical precision, it contains within itself traces of a more complex understanding—an implicit recognition that not all of its 25 qualities are the same kind of thing. Some are indeed trainable skills, while others represent emergent properties of developmental transformation. This section examines how the framework's own evolution reveals an awareness of developmental dynamics, even when this awareness was ultimately muted in the final presentation.

The original five-category scheme

In the original 2021 IDG report, before the framework was adapted for mass communication, the author proposed organizing the 23 skills and qualities (later expanded to 25) into five distinct categories based on their fundamental nature:

Cognition – Referring not only to thinking in the traditional sense, but also to sense-making and creativity, cognitive processes that to a large extent occur below the threshold of awareness. This category included: Complexity awareness, Perspective skills, Sense-making, Creativity, Critical thinking, and Long-term orientation and visioning.

Stances: Attitudes and values – The basic stance with which an individual (or collective) relates to the world (people, issues, events, life in general). Most of these have a significant emotional component in the form of durable feeling dispositions. This category included: Appreciation, Empathy and Compassion, Courage, Optimism, Perseverance, and Openness and Learning mindset.

Identifications – The category referring to core identity, what a person feels he or she fundamentally is. This crucial category included only three items: Connectedness, Inner compass, and Humility.

Relationship to Self – Different from identifications by referring to psychological skills that can be developed by training. This category included: Integrity and Authenticity, Self-awareness, and Presence.

Social skills – A category comprising skills in the more traditional sense, relating to various aspects of working with other people in productive ways. This category included: Communication skills, Co-creation skills, Mobilization skills, Trust, and Inclusive mindset and Inter-cultural competence.

This categorization scheme is revealing. It acknowledges explicitly that some items "can be thought of as skills: abilities that can be learned and trained," while others "do not fit into the conception of skills, but are better understood as personality traits or virtues (some of which can be nurtured and refined), values or *qualities that are functions of a person's level of ego development*" (emphasis added). The framework's author was operating with an understanding anchored in adult development theories, even as the project's broader aims required a different kind of presentation.

The "Identifications" category is particularly significant. By grouping Connectedness, Inner Compass, and Humility together under this label, the original scheme recognized that these

qualities are not skills that can be trained but rather expressions of how identity itself is structured. They represent not what someone knows or can do, but who someone experiences themselves to be and how they relate to the larger wholes of which they are part.

The shift toward accessibility

However, this five-category framework was ultimately set aside in favor of a simpler structure. As the author wrote in the original report: "The IDG project is, however, not primarily a scholarly endeavour, but aims at being suitable for mass communication. The initial draft of 23 skills and qualities divided into 5 main categories was discussed in a rather large number of fora, where the main ambition was to develop a framework and a languaging that makes sense and works well for communication with practitioners: managers, officials, politicians, change agents, etc. In this process, theoretical precision may have to give way for the ambition to reach high levels of face validity in a broad audience."

The final framework organized the 23 (later 25) qualities into five dimensions based on their functional focus rather than their fundamental nature: Being (Relationship to Self), Thinking (Cognitive Skills), Relating (Caring for Others and the World), Collaborating (Social Skills), and Acting (Driving Change). This reorganization served the legitimate purpose of making the framework more intuitively graspable for practitioners. The dimension names speak to recognizable aspects of human functioning and provide a clear structure for thinking about different areas of development.

But something was lost in this translation. Connectedness and Inner Compass, which had been explicitly identified as "identifications"—qualities that are functions of ego development level—were now placed alongside other qualities in the "Relating" and "Being" dimensions respectively, with no explicit acknowledgment of their fundamentally different nature. The pedagogical gain in accessibility came at the cost of obscuring a crucial theoretical distinction.

This was not an oversight but a conscious choice, made for defensible reasons. As the author noted: "There is no 'correct' way to group the skills and qualities, as they are interdependent and overlapping in significant ways. Still, in order to have a framework that is as easy as possible to grasp and work with, a framework with a limited number of main categories was deemed useful." The framework was designed to maximize accessibility and practical utility, and by those criteria, the decision was sound.

Traces of developmental awareness in the framework

Despite the simplification for mass communication, traces of developmental awareness remain visible in the framework's descriptions of specific qualities. These traces are worth examining because they point to the deeper understanding that informs this essay.

On Connectedness: "This is one of the items in the IDG framework that is most profoundly intertwined with felt identity. It involves feeling connected to and being a part of a much larger whole. This sense of connectedness more or less automatically leads to a sense of caring for the well-being of the larger whole." The description acknowledges that Connectedness is about identity structure, not just feelings or values.

On Inner Compass: "Having an 'inner compass' is not a skill, but is rather a consequence of having a broad scope of awareness that also has led to a motivation to care for and contribute to the welfare of something much larger than oneself." Again, the explicit recognition that this is not a trainable skill but an emergent consequence of a particular kind of consciousness.

On Openness and Learning Mindset: "A capacity to be open to learning, reevaluation and be curious about alternative ways of perceiving and interpreting various issues requires a self that has a considerable measure of robustness. If one's sense of self-regard is dependent on identification with a certain self-image or if one's sense of safety is linked to a need to defend a certain set of beliefs and values, there is probably a need for having psychological defense mechanisms that might inhibit the capacity for remaining open and curious when encountering unfamiliar or diverging views or events. Openness and a learning mindset is therefore **not to be regarded solely as a skill that can be trained, but is intimately linked to adult development processes involving the whole self.**"

On Humility: "The stance of humility is here understood to be a consequence of not being (overly) identified with a certain self-image and a need to be confirmed in that self-image by others." Once again, pointing to the structure of self-identification as the determining factor.

On Appreciation: "There are reasons to believe that there is a link between later stages in adult development and the propensity and capacity to be anchored in an appreciative attitude (Cook-Greuter, 1999). The less someone is concerned with defending an ego conception and be absorbed with very pre-defined projects and ideas, the easier it is to appreciate positive qualities in various situations one finds oneself in."

These descriptions reveal a consistent underlying understanding: certain IDG qualities are not separable from the developmental stage of the person. They emerge from particular structures of consciousness and cannot be installed through training that leaves that structure unchanged. The framework itself knows this, even if it cannot fully articulate it within its pedagogical constraints.

A brief primer on ego development stages

To understand how developmental stage shapes the manifestation of IDG qualities, we need a working understanding of what ego development stages are and how they function. This section provides a condensed overview; readers seeking more depth are encouraged to consult the foundational works of Loevinger (1976), Cook-Greuter (1999, 2013), Kegan (1994), and Torbert (2004).

What are stages?

Ego development stages describe qualitatively different ways of making meaning—of interpreting experience, constructing reality, and understanding self and world. They are not about intelligence, knowledge, or capability in any conventional sense. A brilliant scientist at an earlier stage and a modestly educated person at a later stage may be equally intelligent, but they will make fundamentally different sense of the same experiences.

Each stage represents a coherent system of meaning-making characterized by:

- **Subject-object structure:** What we are subject to (embedded in, identified with) versus what we can take as object (reflect on, examine, choose). In Kegan's terms, development is the gradual transformation of subject into object—what was "self" becomes something the self can observe.
- **Locus of authority:** Where moral and epistemic authority resides—in external rules and authorities, in internalized principles, in contextual wisdom, or in the witnessing awareness itself.
- **Time horizon:** The span of time across which the person can meaningfully project and plan, from minutes or hours at early stages to lifetimes or generations at later stages.

- **Scope of identification:** What is experienced as "self" or "us"—the physical body, the social role, the principled individual, the systemic node, the witnessing consciousness.
- **Tolerance for complexity and ambiguity:** The degree to which multiple perspectives, paradoxes, and uncertainty can be held without defensive simplification.

Importantly, stages are not fixed boxes but fluid territories. Most people have a "center of gravity"—the stage from which they most consistently operate—but they can access adjacent stages depending on context, stress level, and familiarity of the situation. Someone might operate from E6 (conscientious) in professional settings, E5 (conformist) in family gatherings, and occasionally touch E7 (individualistic) in reflective moments. The center of gravity represents where they return when not pushed to edges.

The developmental sequence

While different researchers use somewhat different naming conventions, there is substantial agreement on the basic sequence. Using Loevinger's numbering with Cook-Greuter's extensions:

Pre-conventional stages (E2-E3): Meaning-making centered on immediate needs, power dynamics, and external control. Self is defined by what it wants and what it can get. Rules come from outside and are followed (or broken) based on consequences. Identity is primarily physical and impulsive. These stages are characteristic of early childhood, but some adults remain centered here.

Conventional stages (E4-E6): Meaning-making organized around social belonging and internal standards. At E4 (Conformist/Group-oriented), self is defined by social roles and group memberships; moral authority resides in group norms; concern is primarily for fitting in and being accepted. At E6 (Conscientious/Self-authoring), self is defined by chosen principles and achievements; moral authority is internalized; concern is for living up to self-chosen standards and making a meaningful contribution. Most adults in Western societies operate primarily from these two stages.

Post-conventional stages (E7-E9): Meaning-making that recognizes the constructed, contextual nature of all frameworks. At E7 (Individualistic/Self-transforming transition), the person becomes aware that all meaning-making is perspectival and constructed; this can lead to relativism and deconstruction. At E8 (Autonomous/Self-transforming), the person integrates multiple frameworks without collapsing into relativism; can hold principles lightly while acting decisively; operates with genuine worldcentric concern. These stages are relatively rare, comprising perhaps 10-20% of adults in developed nations. At E9 (Construct-aware), the person can observe the ego as a constructed system and begins to experience it as limitation.

Transpersonal stage³ (E10): Meaning-making characterized by decreasing identification with the ego itself. At E10 (Unitive), identity becomes fluid and transparent; experience of non-separation from the larger whole; action flows from being rather than principle. These stages are very rare, perhaps <1% of adults.

How stages develop

Stage development is not automatic or guaranteed. It typically requires:

³ Later in this essay, the Construct-aware stage (E9) is grouped with the Unitive stage as transpersonal stages. This was done by Claude, and is not theoretically correct. However, there are certain similarities between the two stages in terms of disidentifying from being a separate person.

- **Challenge:** Experiences that reveal the limitations of current meaning-making, often through encountering perspectives or complexities that cannot be accommodated within the current structure.
- **Support:** Relationships that provide safety during the disorientation of transition, without trying to "fix" or eliminate the developmental crisis.
- **Time:** Developmental transitions typically take months to years, not weeks. The person must construct a new, more adequate way of making meaning, which cannot be rushed.
- **Integration:** The new stage must be stabilized and become the reliable center of gravity, which requires practice and consolidation.

Most adults develop through E5-E6 through the ordinary challenges of adult life—career, relationships, parenting, facing mortality. Movement beyond E6 typically requires more unusual challenges: encountering genuine cultural difference, grappling with paradox and complexity that resists rational solution, experiencing the relativity of deeply held frameworks, or undergoing transformative practices like meditation, psychotherapy, or intensive self-inquiry.

Why stage matters for the IDG qualities

With this foundation in place, we can now articulate why developmental stage is so consequential for understanding the IDG framework:

First, certain IDG qualities are structurally impossible at certain stages. It is not that people at earlier stages have less Connectedness or a weaker Inner Compass that could be strengthened through training. Rather, the meaning-making structure of earlier stages does not permit these qualities to exist in the form described by the IDG framework. A person at E4 can feel strongly connected to their family, organization, or nation—but they cannot genuinely feel connected to "humanity" or "the planet's web of life" as their lived identity because their identity structure is organized around in-group/out-group distinctions. This is not a deficit but a feature of how meaning-making works at that stage.

Second, many IDG qualities manifest differently at different stages in ways that matter. Take Self-Awareness as an example. At E5, self-awareness means awareness of how one appears to others and whether one is meeting social expectations. At E6, it means awareness of internal states, motivations, and the gap between ideals and behavior. At E7, it includes awareness of one's own meaning-making processes and defensive structures. At E8, it includes awareness of the self as a system with patterns and dynamics. These are not just differences in degree but differences in kind—different phenomena that share a name.

Third, attempting to develop stage-inappropriate capacities can be counterproductive. Teaching E7-level deconstructive perspective-taking to someone at E6 can destabilize their meaning-making without providing resources for reconstruction. Asking E5 individuals to "embrace ambiguity" or "hold multiple truths" may simply create confusion and anxiety, not development. Effective developmental support must be calibrated to the person's actual stage, not to the facilitator's aspirations or the apparent requirements of the work.

Fourth, organizational and collective manifestations also reflect developmental stages. An organization with a center of gravity at E5-E6 will embody IDG qualities differently than one at E7-E8, regardless of the values it espouses. Understanding this helps explain why certain organizational change initiatives succeed or fail—not due to poor implementation but due to developmental mismatch between the intervention and the organizational meaning-making structure.

Finally, recognizing the vertical dimension creates more realistic and compassionate approaches to development. Instead of blaming individuals or organizations for "failing" to embody certain IDG qualities, we can recognize that they may be operating from a meaning-making structure that doesn't yet support those qualities. This shifts the work from trying to install missing skills to creating conditions that support developmental transformation—a fundamentally different endeavor.

The IDG framework's own implicit recognition of these dynamics—visible in its original categorization and scattered throughout its descriptions—points toward the need for this essay. By making the vertical dimension explicit, we can use the framework more effectively, with clearer understanding of what different interventions can accomplish at different stages, and with more realistic expectations about the time and conditions required for genuine transformation.

The following sections will explore this vertical dimension in depth, examining specific IDG qualities to show how they manifest across the developmental spectrum. We begin with qualities where the vertical dimension is most apparent and consequential, then expand to consider the full range of the framework's 25 capacities.

PART II: THE DEVELOPMENTAL SPECTRUM OF SELECTED IDG QUALITIES

2. SELF-AWARENESS - THE FOUNDATION THAT TRANSFORMS

Self-Awareness appears in the IDG framework's "Being" dimension, defined as "Ability to be in reflective contact with thoughts, emotions, desires, and actions; to maintain a realistic self-image and to regulate oneself." This definition seems straightforward—who would argue against the value of knowing oneself? Yet self-awareness has profound developmental depth that illuminates all other IDG qualities. What "self" there is to be aware of, what counts as "realistic," and what self-regulation means all transform fundamentally across developmental stages.

Self-awareness is an ideal starting point for our exploration because it serves as foundation for many other IDG qualities. Without self-awareness, Openness and Learning Mindset becomes reactive rather than chosen, Humility becomes self-effacing rather than grounded, and Integrity and Authenticity lack the internal reference point they require. Yet self-awareness itself is not a single thing but a developmental continuum, with earlier forms being necessary but not sufficient precursors to later forms.

Pre-conventional self-awareness: external focus

Pre-conventional stages (E3): Pre-reflective awareness

At pre-conventional stages, "self-awareness" in the IDG sense barely exists. The person is subject to their immediate impulses, needs, and reactions—these are not objects of awareness but the substance of awareness itself. When angry, they are the anger; when wanting, they are the want. There is little capacity to step back and observe these states as temporary phenomena.

What passes for self-awareness at this stage is primarily awareness of external circumstances and their relation to immediate needs: "I'm hungry," "She has what I want," "They're blocking me." The person knows what they want and whether they're getting it. They have some awareness of how others react to them—whether with approval, resistance, or punishment—but this is instrumental awareness, not reflective self-knowledge.

Self-image at this stage is largely defined by external feedback and comparisons: "I'm stronger than him," "I'm in trouble," "I got what I wanted." There is limited capacity to maintain a stable self-image across contexts or to distinguish between momentary states and enduring characteristics. The person experiences themselves differently from moment to moment without necessarily noticing the inconsistency.

Leadership example: A manager at this level notices "I'm angry that the deadline was missed" but cannot observe the anger or examine its sources. They act from the anger—perhaps berating the team—without awareness that they're doing so. Later, they might be genuinely puzzled when told their behavior was harsh, because they were simply responding to obvious reality (the missed deadline).

Implications for development: Training in self-awareness practices (mindfulness, reflection, journaling) will have limited effect at this stage because the person lacks the subject-object differentiation required to observe their own processes. Interventions that work better include immediate behavioral feedback ("When you yell, people stop talking"), concrete consequences,

and structured environments that create external regulation where internal regulation doesn't yet exist.

Conventional self-awareness: social and principled

Conformist stage (E4): Normative self-awareness

At E4, genuine self-awareness begins to emerge, but it is organized around social norms and role expectations. The person can now step back from immediate impulses enough to ask "What should I be feeling/thinking/doing in this situation?" They have internalized group standards and can evaluate their own conformity to these standards.

Self-awareness at this stage means awareness of how one appears to others and whether one is meeting expectations. The person can report on their internal states, but the descriptions tend to be conventional and somewhat generic: "I felt nervous," "I was excited," "It was embarrassing." These are felt genuinely but described using the emotional vocabulary provided by the culture and group.

The self-image is defined primarily by social roles and group memberships: "I'm a good team member," "I'm a loyal company person," "I'm a caring parent." There is limited awareness of aspects of self that don't fit these roles. The person genuinely doesn't see contradictions between different role-performances because each context activates its appropriate script.

Self-regulation at E4 means controlling impulses that would violate group norms or damage one's reputation. The person can delay gratification, follow procedures, and behave appropriately across contexts. However, this regulation is in service of belonging and acceptance rather than self-authored principles.

Leadership example: A manager at E4 is aware of feeling anxious before presentations and can recognize this as "normal" nervousness. They know they should appear confident and composed, so they work to manage the anxiety enough to fulfill the role. They're aware of their performance but less aware of the deeper concerns driving the anxiety (perhaps fear of being seen as inadequate). They can report: "I get nervous speaking to senior management" but not yet: "My anxiety stems from needing their approval to feel okay about myself."

Implications for development: Self-awareness training at this stage works best when it provides socially validated frameworks for understanding internal experience. Programs that help people identify and name emotions, recognize common patterns, and understand role expectations can be very effective. Group-based reflective practices work well because they provide social support and normalization. However, approaches that challenge the person to question their roles or group identifications will likely be experienced as threatening rather than developmental.

Conscientious stage (E6): Achievement-oriented self-awareness

At E6, self-awareness deepens significantly. The person can now differentiate between their public self-presentation and their private experience. They're aware of the gap between who they are and who they aspire to be, which generates both self-criticism and motivation for self-improvement.

This stage brings strong capacity for introspection and self-evaluation against internalized standards. The person can observe their own thoughts, feelings, and motivations with considerable nuance. They notice patterns in their behavior and can identify triggers, tendencies, and

defensive reactions. They're aware of hypocrisy and inauthenticity as significant issues and work to align their behavior with their principles.

However, while E6 individuals can observe their thoughts and feelings, they remain strongly identified with them. When examining their reactions, they're still embedded in the framework that generates those reactions. They can think about their thinking, but they cannot yet see their thinking as one possible perspective among many. The self-criticism at this stage, while more sophisticated than at E5, still operates within the achievement-orientation that drives the stage—they criticize themselves for not living up to their own standards, but they cannot yet question whether those standards themselves are limiting.

Self-image at E6 is defined by principles, achievements, and self-chosen qualities: "I'm someone who values integrity," "I'm committed to excellence," "I take responsibility for my decisions." This self-image is more stable and coherent than at E5, but it can be rigid. The person invests heavily in maintaining consistency with this self-image and may have difficulty acknowledging aspects of self that don't fit.

Self-regulation becomes sophisticated at this stage. The person can manage emotions, delay gratification in service of long-term goals, maintain discipline, and adjust their approach based on feedback. They're quite skilled at self-management in pursuit of their objectives. However, the regulation is still somewhat effortful and can be experienced as a battle between "higher" and "lower" impulses.

Leadership example: A manager at E6 is keenly aware of their internal states and patterns. They might journal regularly, noting: "I realize I become controlling when I feel uncertain about outcomes. This undermines my team's autonomy and probably stems from perfectionist tendencies developed in childhood." They can articulate sophisticated self-understanding and genuinely work on their patterns. However, they're still embedded in the framework that sees self-improvement as the solution—they can't yet step back to notice how their very investment in being a "good leader" might be driving some of the patterns they're trying to fix.

Implications for development: This is the stage where conventional self-awareness practices work best. Mindfulness, reflective writing, 360-degree feedback, coaching, and developmental assessments can all be highly effective because the person has the cognitive sophistication to use them and the motivation to improve. However, there's a trap: these practices can reinforce the achievement orientation and self-improvement project rather than helping the person move beyond it. The most developmental interventions at this stage are those that gently introduce the possibility that self-acceptance might be as important as self-improvement, and that some patterns can't be solved but must be transcended.

Post-conventional self-awareness: perspectival and systemic

Individualistic stage (E7): Perspectival self-awareness

At E7, a fundamental shift occurs. The person begins to recognize that self-awareness itself is perspectival and constructed. They notice that they experience themselves differently in different contexts and can observe how they construct their self-narrative. This brings both liberation and disorientation.

For the first time, the person can truly differentiate from their thoughts and feelings—not just observe them, but recognize them as phenomena arising within awareness rather than defining what awareness is. They can watch a thought or emotion arise, notice their habitual response to

it, and choose whether to engage with it or let it pass. This is qualitatively different from the E6 capacity to observe and evaluate thoughts and feelings; it's the capacity to not be them.

However, this new awareness can become problematic. E7 individuals often become preoccupied with self-analysis, endlessly examining their own processes and deconstructing their self-narratives. They may become aware of self-deception and defensive structures in ways that create cynicism about the possibility of authentic self-knowledge. The question "Who am I, really, if all my self-concepts are constructed?" can lead to a kind of paralysis.

Self-image becomes more fluid and contextual at E7, sometimes uncomfortably so. The person recognizes that they perform different selves in different contexts and may struggle with whether any of these is "real." They can see through their own ego strategies—recognizing how they seek approval, maintain defenses, and construct favorable self-narratives—but this seeing doesn't necessarily free them from these patterns.

Self-regulation at E7 becomes less about controlling impulses and more about choosing which aspects of self to express in which contexts. However, the multiplicity of perspectives can make decisive action difficult. The person can see so many sides of any situation, including their own contradictory motivations, that they may struggle to commit to a course of action.

Leadership example: A manager at E7 might observe: "I notice I construct different narratives about this team conflict depending on who I'm talking to. With senior management, I emphasize accountability issues. With the team, I focus on systemic constraints. I can see how each Narrative serves my interests in that relationship. But which story is true? Maybe none of them—or all of them. How do I make decisions when I can see the constructed nature of every framework I might use?" This level of awareness is sophisticated but can become paralyzing if not integrated into a more stable post-conventional structure.

Implications for development: E7 is often a transition stage characterized by deconstruction. Conventional self-awareness practices may no longer be satisfying because the person sees through them. What's needed is support for moving through the deconstruction toward reconstruction—help in holding multiple perspectives without collapsing into relativism, and support for decisive action despite acknowledged uncertainty. Practices that emphasize presence and acceptance rather than analysis and improvement become more relevant. The person needs less mirror and more witness—less reflection on self and more resting as awareness itself.

Autonomous stage (E8): Systemic self-awareness

At E8, self-awareness achieves a new integration. The person can observe themselves as a system with patterns and dynamics, without being caught in either identification with those patterns (as at E6) or paralyzed deconstruction of them (as at E7). They see the ego as a constructed system with its characteristic strategies and limitations, and they can work with it rather than being driven by it or trying to eliminate it.

This brings a quality of self-compassion alongside self-examination. The person can notice their defensive reactions, their ego strategies, their contradictions—and hold all of this with kindness rather than judgment. They recognize these patterns as natural products of their developmental history and current circumstances, not as personal failings to be overcome.

Self-awareness at E8 includes awareness of one's own developmental stage and its characteristic capacities and limitations. The person recognizes that they make meaning in particular ways that are both powerful and partial. This awareness creates humility without diminishing

confidence—they can act decisively while acknowledging the perspectival nature of their understanding.

The self-image at E8 is paradoxically both more fluid and more stable than at earlier stages. Fluid because the person can hold multiple self-concepts lightly, recognizing their contextual and constructed nature. Stable because there's less investment in maintaining any particular self-image—the person's sense of worth is not dependent on seeing themselves in particular ways.

Self-regulation becomes more natural and less effortful. The person can notice impulses or reactive patterns arising and choose whether to act on them, but this choosing is lighter and more spontaneous than the disciplined self-control of E6. There's less sense of battling oneself and more sense of skillful responsiveness.

Leadership example: A manager at E8 might notice: "I see my defensive pattern activating—the impulse to justify and defend when challenged. I recognize this as my ego's protective strategy, developed over decades. I can feel the physiological arousal, notice the thoughts marshaling evidence, observe the impulse to speak. And I can choose: sometimes I express the defense if it serves the conversation, sometimes I acknowledge the challenge and sit with the vulnerability, sometimes I inquire into what triggered the reaction. None of these choices is 'better'—what matters is conscious choice rather than automatic reaction. And even when I do react automatically, I can notice it afterward without harsh self-judgment, learning from the pattern for next time."

Implications for development: At this stage, self-awareness practice becomes more about presence and being than analysis and improvement. The person benefits from practices that cultivate witnessing awareness—meditation, contemplative inquiry, somatic practices that develop capacity to notice and be with experience without trying to change it. Developmental relationships matter more than techniques—engagement with others who can meet them at their level and support further edge-work.

Transpersonal self-awareness: witnessing and non-dual

Construct-aware⁴ and Unitive stages (E9-E10): Witnessing awareness

At transpersonal stages, self-awareness transforms once more. At E9 (Construct-aware), the person can observe the ego itself as a constructed system and begins to dis-identify from it. There's awareness of awareness—the capacity to witness consciousness operating, including the witness itself. This can sound abstract, but it's experientially quite concrete: the person notices thoughts arising and passing, emotions arising and passing, and the ego-self constructing narratives, all within a more spacious awareness that is not identical with any of these phenomena.

At E10 (Unitive), self-awareness becomes paradoxical. There is heightened awareness but less preoccupation with self. The boundaries between observer and observed become permeable. The person experiences awareness not as something they have but as what they are—or more accurately, as what's happening through the form that appears as "them." Descriptions necessarily become paradoxical: there is both acute awareness of the particular form (body,

⁴ The construct-aware stage is normally regarded to be a late post-conventional stage, rather than transpersonal, but here it is bundled with the unitive stage.

personality, history, patterns) and recognition that this form is not ultimately separate from the larger field of being.

Self-image at these stages is minimal or fluid. At E9, there's recognition that all self-images are constructed and limiting, leading to playfulness with identity rather than investment in any particular self-concept. At E10, the very question of self-image loses relevance—there's a self-form that functions in the world, but it's not taken as essentially defining.

Self-regulation at transpersonal stages is less about managing impulses and more about allowing life to flow through one's form while maintaining appropriate responsiveness to context. There's less sense of an autonomous agent controlling themselves and more sense of responsive participation in life's unfolding.

Leadership example: A manager at these stages might simply be present with what's arising— noticing the meeting dynamics, the various perspectives, the emotional currents, their own reactions—without being caught in any of it. They can participate fully while maintaining a quality of spacious awareness. When asked about themselves, they might say something like: "There are patterns here that show up as 'me'—tendencies, capabilities, limitations. I can work with those skillfully. But I'm not identical with them. Leadership happens through this form, but it's not exactly that 'I' am doing it in the conventional sense." This can sound mystical, but in practice it often manifests as very grounded, responsive, effective leadership that doesn't take itself too seriously.

Implications for development: At these stages, conventional notions of development become less relevant. The person is less interested in becoming better and more interested in simply being. What supports continued opening is usually deep practice (meditation, contemplation, inquiry into nature of mind), engagement with teachers or communities operating at similar or further reaches of development, and life circumstances that call forth expression of this consciousness in action.

Summary and implications

This detailed examination of self-awareness across developmental stages reveals several crucial insights for working with the IDG framework:

First, "self-awareness" is not one thing but a developmental continuum. Each stage represents a qualitatively different relationship to internal experience. The E4-E5 person's awareness of how they appear to others, the E6 person's introspective self-evaluation, the E7 person's deconstructive self-examination, the E8 person's systemic self-understanding, and the E9+ person's witnessing awareness are not just different degrees of the same capacity. They are different phenomena that require different structures of consciousness.

Second, self-awareness training must be calibrated to developmental stage. Mindfulness practices work differently at E5 (supporting awareness of emotional states and social appropriateness), E6 (supporting introspection and self-management), E7 (supporting dis-identification from thoughts), and E8+ (supporting presence and acceptance). Using E8-level practices with E5-E6 participants may be ineffective or even destabilizing.

Third, self-awareness is foundational for other IDG qualities but in stage-specific ways. The E6 form of self-awareness supports principled decision-making and self-discipline. The E7 form supports perspective-taking and recognition of constructed nature of frameworks. The E8 form supports holding complexity and acting decisively despite uncertainty. Each enables different capacities.

Fourth, supporting vertical development in self-awareness requires different interventions than horizontal skill-building. Moving from E6 to E7 self-awareness doesn't happen through better introspection techniques but through experiences that reveal the limitations of self-improvement as frame—perhaps through meditation that allows gaps in the commentary, relationships that mirror back one's ego strategies, or life circumstances that destabilize cherished self-concepts.

Finally, the IDG definition of self-awareness implicitly assumes at least E6 capacity. The ability to "be in reflective contact with thoughts, emotions, desires, and actions" requires the subject-object differentiation that emerges at E6. Earlier stages can develop valuable awareness within their meaning-making structure, but not the reflective self-awareness the definition describes. This is not a criticism of the IDG framework but an important recognition for practitioners: not all participants will be ready for the form of self-awareness the framework describes, and that's okay—they can develop the form of self-awareness appropriate to their stage.

With this foundation in understanding how one IDG quality transforms across developmental stages, we can now examine other qualities with similar depth. Each will reveal its own developmental arc, showing how vertical transformation fundamentally shapes what these capacities mean and how they can be cultivated.

3. COMPLEXITY AWARENESS - WHAT CAN BE SEEN DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU STAND

Complexity Awareness appears in the IDG framework's "Thinking" dimension, defined as "Ability to understand complexity and work with the interconnections and properties of systems." In the original 2021 IDG survey, this quality ranked second in importance among all 23 skills and qualities, reflecting practitioners' recognition that sustainability challenges are irreducibly complex and require sophisticated capacity to navigate them.

Yet complexity awareness has rarely acknowledged developmental preconditions. Organizations invest heavily in systems thinking training, causal loop diagrams, and complexity frameworks, often with disappointing results. Some participants embrace the tools enthusiastically while others find them confusing or impractical. Rarely do we recognize that the capacity to genuinely perceive and work with complexity is not just a matter of learning techniques but depends fundamentally on one's developmental stage.

What counts as "complex," how complexity is experienced, and what can be done with complexity awareness all transform across developmental stages. More fundamentally, the very structure of causality—how we understand that one thing leads to another—changes as consciousness develops. This makes complexity awareness an ideal second quality for our detailed examination.

Early conventional complexity awareness: concrete causality

The early conventional stage (E4): Simple cause and effect

At pre-conventional stages, the world is understood through immediate, concrete cause-effect relationships. "X made Y happen" is the characteristic form of understanding. If someone is angry, it's because someone did something to make them angry. If a project failed, it's because someone messed up. Causality is simple, direct, and usually personal.

There is no genuine capacity for complexity awareness at this stage. When faced with situations involving multiple interacting factors, the person experiences confusion or threat, not interesting complexity. The natural response is to simplify—to identify a single cause, usually the most proximate and concrete one, or to seek a strong authority figure who can cut through the confusion and tell people what to do.

Systems thinking at this stage is literally incomprehensible. The notion that multiple factors might interact in circular causality, that interventions might have delayed or counterintuitive effects, that problems might not have clear villains—these ideas don't compute. They're not rejected; they're simply not graspable within the meaning-making structure available.

Organizational example: When a sustainability initiative fails, the E4 response is to identify who's responsible and punish or replace them. "The project failed because Sarah didn't do her job." There's no consideration of systemic factors—inadequate resources, conflicting incentives, unclear authority, organizational culture. The simple causal story feels complete and satisfying. Attempts to introduce systems thinking—"Well, actually there were multiple factors..."—are experienced as making excuses or avoiding accountability.

Implications for development: Systems thinking training will be ineffective and potentially frustrating at this stage. What can help is very concrete, step-by-step problem-solving with clear cause-effect chains: "When you do A, B happens. When B happens, then C follows." Building

capacity to track slightly longer causal chains is developmental work at this stage. Accepting that some problems don't have simple solutions or clear villains is not yet accessible.

Conventional complexity awareness: complicated but not complex

Self-aware stage (E5): Multiple factors as list

At E5, the person can recognize that multiple factors contribute to outcomes. This is an important cognitive advance: the world is no longer reducible to single causes. However, these multiple factors are understood as an additive list rather than as an interactive system. "The problem happened because of Factor A, Factor B, Factor C, and Factor D" replaces the simple single-cause attribution of earlier stages.

This is complicated thinking but not yet complex thinking. The factors are seen as separate contributors that add up to produce an outcome, not as elements in dynamic interaction. There's limited awareness of feedback loops, emergent properties, or non-linear relationships. Causality is still fundamentally linear—it's just that there are now multiple linear chains to consider rather than one.

The person at E5 handles this complication through categories and procedures. When faced with a multifaceted problem, they work through a checklist of considerations: "We need to think about costs, schedule, quality, stakeholder satisfaction, regulatory compliance..." This is valuable practical reasoning, but it doesn't yet grasp the system as a whole with its characteristic dynamics.

There's still a strong pull toward simplification. Given a complex situation, the E5 person will often default to familiar categories and standard procedures. "This is a Type B problem, so we follow the Type B procedure." Situations that don't fit established categories are experienced as confusing exceptions rather than as opportunities to revise understanding.

Organizational example: When analyzing why carbon emissions aren't decreasing despite organizational commitments, an E5 approach might list factors: "lack of budget allocation, insufficient staff training, competing priorities, unclear accountability, inadequate monitoring systems, resistance from some departments." This list is accurate and useful. However, it doesn't capture how these factors interact—how budget constraints reduce training which increases resistance which makes leaders avoid accountability which reduces budget allocation. The system dynamics remain invisible.

Implications for development: At this stage, people can learn to identify more factors and organize them in structured ways. Tools like SWOT analysis, stakeholder mapping, and risk matrices work well because they organize multiple considerations without requiring genuine systems thinking. What prepares the ground for E6 capacity is experience with situations where the procedural approach doesn't work—where following all the steps still leads to unexpected outcomes, revealing that something more than complication is at play.

Conscientious stage (E6): Systems as mechanisms

At E6, genuine systems thinking becomes possible. The person can now understand feedback loops, time delays, unintended consequences, and emergent properties. They can grasp that changing one element in a system affects other elements, which affect others, which may eventually affect the original element. This is qualitatively different from the additive multi-factor thinking of E5.

E6 individuals can learn and effectively use systems thinking tools: causal loop diagrams, stock-and-flow models, leverage points analysis, system archetypes. They can identify reinforcing and balancing feedback loops, recognize limits to growth patterns, and anticipate unintended consequences of interventions. This is sophisticated cognitive work that requires the abstractive capacity that emerges at this stage.

However, there's a characteristic limitation at E6: systems are understood as objective realities "out there" that can be correctly mapped and analyzed. The person assumes that with sufficient analysis, they can identify the real structure of the system and determine the objectively correct leverage points. There's limited awareness that system boundaries are constructed, that different observers might draw different but equally valid system maps, or that the observer is inevitably part of the system being observed.

This creates a particular relationship to complexity: it's a puzzle to be solved through better analysis. The E6 person experiences complexity as intellectually engaging and believes that understanding system dynamics will lead to knowing what should be done. There's confidence that rational analysis can, in principle, master complexity.

The E6 approach to systems can become quite sophisticated—developing elaborate models, identifying multiple feedback loops, considering second and third-order effects. Yet it remains within a fundamentally mechanistic frame: the system is like a complicated machine that can be understood through careful analysis of its parts and their relationships.

Organizational example: An E6 sustainability director creates a comprehensive causal loop diagram showing how organizational carbon emissions are influenced by: energy costs driving efficiency investments, which reduce emissions, which reduce urgency, which reduces investment (balancing loop); employee engagement driving behavioral changes, which reduce emissions, which build reputation, which attract engaged employees (reinforcing loop); budget allocation enabling monitoring, which reveals problems, which justifies budget (reinforcing loop); and multiple other interconnections. The analysis is impressive and genuinely insightful. However, the director presents it as THE system structure, not recognizing it as one possible mapping. When others see the system differently, the director's response is to refine the analysis to make it more accurate, not to recognize that multiple valid mappings might coexist.

Implications for development: This is the stage where systems thinking training is most effective in conventional terms. People at E6 can learn the tools, apply them skillfully, and produce valuable analysis. However, there's a trap: the tools can reinforce the belief that complexity can be mastered through better analysis. What supports development toward E7 is encountering situations where careful systems analysis still doesn't resolve persistent dilemmas—where different stakeholders have genuinely incommensurable framings, where the observer effect is undeniable, or where the system's response to analysis changes the system itself in ways that invalidate the analysis.

Post-conventional complexity awareness: contextual and generative

Individualistic stage (E7): Contextual complexity

At E7, a fundamental shift in relationship to complexity occurs. The person recognizes that system boundaries and definitions are interpretive choices, not objective features of reality. They understand that how you bound a system, what you include and exclude, what variables you track, what counts as a causal relationship—all of these are shaped by the observer's framework, purposes, and assumptions.

This brings awareness that there is no single "correct" system map. Different stakeholders with different purposes and perspectives will legitimately bound and understand the system differently. The environmental NGO, the corporate sustainability officer, the financial analyst, the local community member—each constructs a different but potentially valid system understanding based on what they care about and what they can see from their position.

E7 also brings acute awareness that the observer is part of the system being observed. Any analysis of the system affects the system, including the analyzer's position within it. This is not just the Heisenberg uncertainty principle as metaphor—it's recognition that in human systems, analysis and intervention are inseparable. The sustainability audit changes what it measures; the stakeholder engagement process changes stakeholder relationships; the strategy document shapes the reality it claims to describe.

However, this awareness can become paralyzing. If all system maps are partial and perspectival, how do you choose which one to use? If every intervention changes the system in unpredictable ways, how do you act? The E7 person can become lost in infinite regress of complexity—aware of so many layers, perspectives, and paradoxes that decisive action becomes difficult.

There's often a quality of deconstruction at E7—taking apart the confident systems analyses of E6 to show their hidden assumptions and limitations. This is valuable critical capacity but can become its own trap if it doesn't evolve toward reconstruction.

Organizational example: An E7 consultant reviewing the organization's carbon reduction strategy observes: "You've mapped the technical system of energy use and emissions quite well. But notice what's not in your map: the meaning employees make of sustainability—some see it as corporate greenwashing, others as authentic commitment. Notice how the very existence of this strategy creates positioning dynamics among departments—who gets credit, who bears costs, who controls resources. Notice how my presence as external consultant is changing what people are willing to say about constraints. Any system boundary we draw is a choice that includes some realities and excludes others. The financial analysts bound the system to include costs and ROI; the environmentalists include ecosystem impacts; the HR team includes employee morale; the community activists include health impacts on neighboring residents. Which of these is the 'real' system?" This is sophisticated awareness, but the leadership team may experience it as unhelpfully relativistic if the consultant doesn't help them navigate the multiple perspectives toward actionable integration.

Implications for development: At E7, conventional systems thinking training may feel inadequate because it doesn't acknowledge the constructed nature of systems. What's needed is support for holding multiple system framings simultaneously without requiring them to be collapsed into one "true" map. Practices in perspective-taking, stakeholder dialogue across paradigms, and action research approaches that embrace the observer as participant become more relevant. The person needs help moving through deconstruction toward integration—learning to act decisively within acknowledged uncertainty rather than being paralyzed by it.

Autonomous stage (E8): Embracing irreducible complexity

At E8, complexity awareness achieves a new integration. The person can hold multiple system framings simultaneously without either collapsing them into false unity or remaining paralyzed by their incommensurability. They recognize that different stakeholders' system maps capture different but real aspects of the situation, and they can work with these multiple realities without needing to resolve them into a single "correct" understanding.

This enables a different quality of engagement with complexity—not trying to master it through better analysis (E6) or deconstructing all claims to understanding (E7), but participating skillfully within it. The E8 person can use systems tools strategically while holding them lightly, recognizing they are heuristics rather than representations of reality.

There's comfort with irreducible uncertainty and paradox at this stage. The person can act decisively while acknowledging they don't fully understand the system and cannot predict all consequences. This is not cavalier action but mature acknowledgment that in complex adaptive systems, understanding is always incomplete and action must proceed nonetheless.

E8 brings capacity to see complexity as generative rather than just problematic. The multiple perspectives, the emergent properties, the unpredictable dynamics—these aren't just challenges to be managed but sources of possibility and creativity. The person can work with the system's own intelligence rather than trying to impose control on it.

This includes recognizing one's own participation in the system differently. Rather than trying to be an objective outside observer (E6) or being paralyzed by awareness of one's observer effect (E7), the E8 person consciously participates as part of the system, using their position strategically while remaining open to how the system shapes them in turn.

Organizational example: An E8 chief sustainability officer approaches a complex implementation challenge: "We have multiple valid framings of this situation. Finance sees it as cost-benefit optimization. Operations sees it as process redesign. Marketing sees it as brand positioning. Community stakeholders see it as environmental justice. Rather than trying to determine which is 'right,' I'll create containers where these different framings can interact productively. The solution won't come from my analysis—it will emerge from the quality of engagement across these perspectives. I'll intervene at certain points to shift patterns I see developing, knowing each intervention will change the system in ways I can't fully predict. I'll watch for emergence—for insights and possibilities that none of us could have designed. And I'll hold all this lightly enough that when my own framing proves inadequate, I can let it go." This sounds abstract, but in practice it manifests as highly effective complexity leadership that others often experience as wise.

Implications for development: At this stage, complexity work becomes more about presence, pattern recognition, and skillful participation than about analysis and planning. What supports continued development is engagement with increasingly complex challenges, relationships with others who can operate at similar levels of complexity, and practices that develop capacity for paradox, uncertainty, and emergence. The person benefits less from technique training and more from contexts where complexity leadership is required and supported.

Transpersonal complexity awareness: natural and seamless

Construct-aware and Unitive stages (E9-E10): Complexity as nature of reality

At transpersonal stages, complexity is no longer experienced as something to be understood or managed but as the fundamental nature of reality. There's less division between self and system, observer and observed. The person experiences themselves as pattern within the larger pattern, local expression of the whole.

This brings a paradoxical simplicity. While the person can perceive multiple layers of complexity when needed, there's less compulsion to analyze or map them. They respond to situations with a kind of direct knowing that doesn't require elaborate mental models—sensing into the field and responding from that sensing.

At E9, there's explicit awareness that all mental models, including systems models, are constructed representations that both reveal and conceal. The person can use sophisticated analysis when useful but doesn't mistake the map for the territory. They're comfortable with not knowing, with letting understanding emerge through engagement rather than trying to figure it out in advance.

At E10, the relationship to complexity becomes even more immediate and less mediated by concepts. The person responds to the moment's needs without necessarily constructing elaborate narratives about system dynamics. This can look like remarkable simplicity—doing the obvious next right thing—while simultaneously being informed by deep perception of context and consequence.

Organizational example: A transpersonal leader in a complex change initiative might work very simply: showing up present to what's happening, asking questions that shift perception, making small interventions that shift system dynamics, creating space for emergence. When asked about their strategy, they might say something like: "I don't have a master plan. I sense into what wants to happen and try to serve that. Sometimes that means stepping back, sometimes stepping forward. The system has its own intelligence—my role is to help remove obstacles to its natural evolution." This can sound mystical, but often such leaders are remarkably effective precisely because they're not trying to control complexity but working with it.

Implications for development: At these stages, the language of "developing complexity awareness" becomes less apt. The person is less interested in increasing capacities and more interested in decreasing interference with natural awareness. What supports them is usually deep contemplative practice, engagement with life-or-death complexity (literal or metaphorical), and freedom from organizational structures that require constant justification of actions through rational planning.

Summary and implications

This examination of complexity awareness across developmental stages reveals crucial insights for practitioners:

First, there is a developmental threshold for genuine systems thinking. Meaningful engagement with feedback loops, emergent properties, and non-linear causality requires at least E6 capacity. Below this, "complexity awareness" means something different—awareness that multiple factors matter (E5) or that situations are confusing (E3-E4). Training programs that assume participants can grasp systems dynamics will fail if most participants haven't yet developed this capacity.

Second, systems thinking tools can be used at different levels of sophistication. The same causal loop diagram will be understood mechanistically at E6 (as representation of objective reality), contextually at E7 (as one possible mapping), dialectically at E8 (as useful heuristic among others), and lightly at E9+ (as sometimes-helpful pointer). The tool remains the same; what changes is the relationship to it. This means we shouldn't assume that using systems tools indicates genuine systems thinking—we must attend to how the tools are being used.

Third, sustainability challenges particularly demand post-conventional complexity awareness. Climate change, biodiversity loss, social inequality—these are not just complicated (many factors) but complex (emergent, adaptive, multi-scale, involving incommensurable stakeholder framings). Addressing them effectively requires at least E7-E8 capacity to work across paradigms and act within irreducible uncertainty. Yet most organizational cultures

operate from E5-E6 center of gravity. This developmental gap helps explain why sustainability progress remains frustratingly slow despite increased awareness and commitment.

Fourth, supporting development of complexity awareness requires different approaches at different stages. At E5, help people identify and organize multiple factors. At E6, teach systems thinking tools and create experiences of applying them. At the E6-E7 transition, create encounters with genuine paradigm differences and the observer effect. At E7-E8, support movement from deconstruction to integration through action research and multi-stakeholder engagement. At E8+, provide complexity leadership opportunities where their capacities can be exercised and further developed.

Fifth, organizational development must attend to collective center of gravity. An organization with E5-E6 center of gravity will struggle to implement strategies that require E7-E8 complexity awareness, regardless of what the strategy documents say. This isn't about having a few sophisticated thinkers; it's about the collective capacity to hold and work with complexity. Building this capacity is itself a complex developmental challenge that cannot be achieved through training alone but requires transformation of organizational culture, structures, and leadership.

Finally, the IDG framework's definition implicitly assumes significant developmental sophistication. The ability to "understand complexity and work with the interconnections and properties of systems" describes E6+ capacity. This doesn't invalidate the framework—it appropriately identifies what's needed for sustainability work. But it does mean practitioners must recognize that not all participants will be ready for the complexity awareness the framework describes. Some will need to develop through earlier stages first. Others may be at appropriate developmental levels but operating in organizational contexts that don't support complex thinking. Understanding these dynamics helps us work more realistically and compassionately with actual humans and organizations as they are, while supporting them toward where they need to go.

With complexity awareness examined, we turn next to qualities that involve perspective-taking and the capacity to work across different ways of seeing—abilities that prove equally dependent on developmental stage.

4. PERSPECTIVE SKILLS - BEYOND ROLE-TAKING

Perspective Skills appears in the IDG framework's "Thinking" dimension, defined as "Ability to learn from diverse perspectives and integrate insights into reflective sense-making and action." This capacity is essential for collaboration across differences, stakeholder engagement, and addressing the inherently multi-perspectival nature of sustainability challenges where indigenous communities, corporations, scientists, policymakers, and future generations all have legitimate but different stakes and views.

Yet what counts as "perspective-taking" transforms fundamentally across developmental stages. The difference is not just between better and worse perspective-taking but between qualitatively different capacities: from inability to take perspectives at all, through understanding perspectives as roles, to grasping perspectives as frameworks, to holding multiple incommensurable perspectives simultaneously. Each developmental stage brings its own relationship to otherness, its own way of encountering different ways of seeing.

Perspective skills are particularly illuminating for understanding vertical development because they make visible the subject-object structure that defines each stage. What the person is subject to—embedded in, identified with, unable to see—determines what perspectives they can and cannot take. As development proceeds, what was subject becomes object—what was "me" becomes "mine," what was "reality" becomes "my perspective on reality"—progressively expanding the range of perspectives that can be recognized and integrated.

Early conventional perspective-taking: egocentric awareness

Early conventional stage (E4): No genuine perspective-taking

At the early conventional stage, there is no genuine perspective-taking in the sense the IDG framework describes. The person experiences the world from their own immediate position but cannot step outside it to imagine how things appear from elsewhere. What they see is simply "how things are," not "how things appear to me."

The person can recognize that others want different things or have different reactions, but this is understood concretely and instrumentally, not as different perspectives on shared reality. "She wants the resource I want" is graspable; "She sees this situation completely differently than I do" is not. Others are registered primarily in terms of their impact on the person's own interests—as helpers, obstacles, threats, or resources.

There may be mimicry of perspective-taking—the person learns that saying "I understand how you feel" produces certain responses—but this is not genuine grasp of another's perspective. It's instrumental behavior that serves the person's immediate goals. When asked to explain someone else's viewpoint, the response typically collapses into how that person's behavior affects the speaker.

Stakeholder engagement example: In a consultation about a new environmental policy, a participant at this level might say: "The farmers are being unreasonable. They should just accept the new regulations." When asked to explain the farmers' perspective, they might respond: "They're upset because they'll lose money." This captures a fact about the farmers' situation but doesn't represent genuine perspective-taking—understanding how the situation appears from within the farmers' meaning-making framework. The participant's own framing (the policy is reasonable; resistance is about money) remains unquestioned and assumed to be objective reality.

Implications for development: Training in perspective-taking will be largely ineffective at this stage because the cognitive structure required doesn't yet exist. What can help is very concrete role-play where the person physically takes different positions and experiences immediate concrete consequences of choices. Building capacity for delayed gratification and considering future consequences of present actions creates foundation for later perspective-taking. The person needs to develop enough self-other differentiation to recognize that others have their own center of experience before they can learn to imagine what that experience might be.

Conventional perspective-taking: roles and principles

Self-aware stage (E5): Role-based perspective-taking

At E5, genuine perspective-taking emerges, but it is organized around social roles and categories. The person can imagine how someone in a different role might see a situation: "Parents think this way, teachers think that way, managers have this concern, workers have that concern." This is real cognitive achievement—the capacity to step outside immediate self-interest and grasp that different positions yield different experiences.

However, perspectives are understood through the lens of familiar categories and stereotypes. "The business perspective" or "the environmental perspective" or "the community perspective" are grasped as relatively fixed positions associated with particular roles or group memberships. There's limited recognition that individuals within these categories might have diverse views, or that the categories themselves are constructed rather than natural.

Perspective-taking at E5 operates through role-switching: imagining oneself in the other's position. "If I were a farmer facing this regulation, I would worry about..." This is valuable but has limitations. The person tends to imagine how they would feel in the other role, which may not capture how someone formed by different experiences and commitments actually sees things. The empathic projection remains somewhat egocentric—"how I would feel if..." rather than "how they feel given who they are."

There's strong motivation at this stage to find common ground and smooth over differences. When encountering perspectives that conflict with group norms, the E5 response is often to minimize the differences or to explain them away as misunderstandings. Genuine paradigm differences that can't be resolved through better communication or goodwill are experienced as uncomfortable and potentially threatening to group cohesion.

Stakeholder engagement example: In the same environmental policy consultation, an E5 participant might say: "I understand the farmers are worried about their livelihoods. They've worked the land for generations and feel attached to their traditional practices. The environmentalists care about protecting nature. The government officials need to follow the law and respond to public pressure. Everyone has good reasons for their position." This shows real perspective-taking—the person can articulate different stakeholder positions. However, the perspectives are somewhat stereotyped (farmers as traditionalists, environmentalists as nature-protectors) and the implicit hope is that understanding will lead to agreement: "If we all just listened to each other, we could find common ground."

Implications for development: This is the stage where basic perspective-taking training is most effective. Structured exercises in articulating stakeholder positions, role-play with clear category boundaries, and dialogue processes that emphasize listening and understanding all work well. What begins to challenge the adequacy of E5 perspective-taking is encountering genuine value conflicts that can't be resolved through mutual understanding—situations where

everyone has listened carefully, understands the others' positions, and still fundamentally disagrees because they're operating from different value frameworks.

Conscientious stage (E6): Principled perspective analysis

At E6, perspective-taking becomes more sophisticated and principled. The person can understand that perspectives are grounded in different values, priorities, and principles, not just different roles or interests. They can articulate the internal logic of a viewpoint different from their own, explaining how someone with different foundational commitments would reasonably reach different conclusions.

This brings capacity for genuine intellectual empathy—understanding perspectives from the inside, grasping the coherence and rationale of views one doesn't share. The E6 person can construct steel-man arguments for opposing positions, demonstrating that they understand not just what others believe but why it makes sense to them. This is valuable capacity for any form of complex stakeholder engagement or multi-perspective deliberation.

However, there's a characteristic limitation: while the person can understand different perspectives, they typically evaluate them all against their own internalized standards of validity. After carefully articulating diverse viewpoints, they determine which is most correct based on their principles of rational analysis, empirical evidence, ethical reasoning, or whatever framework they've adopted. The perspectives are objects of analysis, examined and assessed from the person's own meaning-making structure which itself remains invisible—simply "how one thinks clearly."

This can create a particular dynamic in stakeholder engagement: the E6 person is excellent at understanding and articulating diverse views, but they ultimately believe there is a correct answer that emerges from proper reasoning. Different perspectives are treated as inputs to analysis rather than as potentially incommensurable ways of making meaning. The goal is to resolve differences by determining which position has the stronger argument.

E6 individuals are often very skilled at debate—understanding opposing views well enough to dismantle them effectively. This skill with perspectives can paradoxically create barriers to genuine dialogue when different perspectives are based on fundamentally different meaning-making frameworks rather than different applications of shared principles.

Stakeholder engagement example: An E6 facilitator might prepare thorough analysis: "The indigenous community's perspective is grounded in relational ontology—they see themselves as part of the land, not owners of it. Their opposition to the development isn't just economic but reflects fundamentally different cosmology. The development company's perspective is grounded in property rights, economic efficiency, and legal entitlements. The environmental scientists' perspective is grounded in ecological data about biodiversity impacts. Each has internal coherence." This is sophisticated understanding. However, the facilitator's next move is typically to evaluate: "Based on the empirical evidence about ecosystem impacts, the weight of ethical considerations regarding future generations, and the legal framework's inadequate recognition of indigenous rights, I conclude that the development should not proceed in its current form." The facilitator has made a principled judgment but hasn't recognized that the very framework for making such judgments (weighing empirical evidence, ethical considerations, and legal rights) is itself one perspective among others, not neutral ground.

Implications for development: At E6, people excel at structured multi-perspective analysis but may need challenges that reveal the limits of trying to rationally resolve all differences. What

supports movement toward E7 is encountering situations where: different stakeholders with equal rationality reach opposite conclusions; one's own framework proves inadequate to capture what others are expressing; or careful analysis still leaves persistent dilemmas. Academic exposure to multiple theoretical paradigms, deep cross-cultural immersion, or engagement with contemplative traditions that question ordinary rationality can provide productive challenge. The person needs experiences that help them recognize their own perspective as perspective rather than as "thinking clearly."

Post-conventional perspective-taking: holding multiplicity

Individualistic stage (E7): Radical perspectivalism

At E7, a fundamental transformation occurs in the relationship to perspectives. The person recognizes that all perspectives—including their own—are partial, constructed, and contextual. There is no "view from nowhere," no neutral ground from which to adjudicate between perspectives. Each way of seeing reveals certain aspects of reality while concealing others; each framework illuminates and obscures.

This brings capacity to genuinely inhabit multiple contradictory perspectives without needing to resolve them into unity. The E7 person can shift fluidly between different frameworks, experiencing how the world appears from within each, recognizing that each has its own validity and limitations. They understand that indigenous relational ontology, Western scientific materialism, economic utilitarianism, and rights-based ethical frameworks are not just different opinions about a shared reality but different ways of constructing reality itself.

However, this awareness can become destabilizing. If all perspectives are partial and constructed, including one's own, what grounds action? How does one choose between incommensurable frameworks? The E7 person may become caught in endless perspectival exploration, fascinated by the multiplicity of viewpoints but struggling to commit to any particular course of action. They can see validity in every position, which can lead to paralysis or cynicism.

There's often acute awareness at E7 of power dynamics in perspective-taking: whose perspectives get recognized as valid, whose frameworks are treated as normal versus exotic, which voices are centered versus marginalized. This critical awareness is valuable but can also become its own trap if it leads to performative deference to marginalized perspectives without genuine integration, or to guilty paralysis about one's own positionality.

E7 individuals are often excellent at deconstructing other people's perspective-taking efforts, revealing their hidden assumptions and biases. They can point out how the well-meaning E6 facilitator's "neutral analysis" actually privileges certain epistemologies over others. This critical capacity is important but needs to evolve toward reconstruction if it's to support effective engagement with diversity.

Stakeholder engagement example: An E7 consultant might observe: "Notice that the entire framing of this consultation already privileges certain perspectives. By asking 'should the development proceed?' we've accepted a framework where development is the default and the question is whether to stop it. From an indigenous perspective, the question might be 'how can we maintain the land's health and our relationship to it?' which makes development the intervention to justify, not the baseline. The very format of stakeholder consultation—individuals or representatives stating positions for consideration by decision-makers—reflects Western liberal democratic assumptions about knowledge and authority. Some communities make decisions through consensus processes over extended time that don't fit this format. The

scientific 'facts' we treat as objective—species population data, economic projections—are themselves constructed through particular methodological frameworks that encode values. There's no neutral way to integrate these perspectives because they're not commensurate." This analysis is sophisticated and important. However, if it ends here, stakeholders may feel paralyzed—if there's no way to integrate perspectives, how do we proceed?

Implications for development: E7 is often a transitional stage characterized by deconstruction that needs to evolve toward reconstruction. What supports this is not more perspective-taking training—the person is already expert at inhabiting multiple perspectives—but support for acting decisively within acknowledged uncertainty and incommensurability. Action research approaches, collaborative inquiry across paradigms, and engagement with complexity that demands response all help. The person needs contexts where they must make choices and act despite lacking the epistemological certainty they've learned to deconstruct. They need to discover that commitment and action are possible without requiring that their perspective be The Truth.

Autonomous stage (E8): Dialectical integration

At E8, perspective-taking achieves a new integration. The person can hold multiple incommensurable perspectives simultaneously without either collapsing them into false unity or remaining paralyzed by their multiplicity. They recognize that different perspectives capture different valid aspects of complex reality and can work with this multiplicity productively.

This brings capacity for what we might call "perspectival wisdom"—knowing when to foreground which perspectives, how to create containers where different ways of knowing can be honored, and how to support emergence of new possibilities that no single perspective could have designed. The E8 person doesn't try to resolve incommensurability through higher synthesis (which would be E6 move) or remain in deconstructive analysis (E7 move). Instead, they work with the tension between perspectives as generative.

There's genuine comfort with paradox at this stage—the capacity to say "both/and" without collapsing the distinction, to hold that multiple contradictory framings can each be valid. The person can move fluidly between perspectives based on context and purpose, using each as a tool without being limited by any. They can engage across paradigms without requiring agreement on foundations, finding ways to coordinate action despite fundamental differences in meaning-making.

Importantly, E8 brings capacity to work with one's own positionality consciously. The person recognizes their own perspective as partial and positioned, can acknowledge its limitations, and can use it strategically while remaining open to revision. They don't try to escape their perspective or apologize for it; they work with it as the particular window through which they engage reality.

E8 perspective skills manifest as exceptional facilitation and leadership across difference—creating spaces where stakeholders with fundamentally different frameworks can engage productively, where mutual learning occurs without requiring consensus, where coordinated action emerges from diversity rather than unity.

Stakeholder engagement example: An E8 facilitator might work this way: "We have multiple irreducibly different ways of understanding this situation. Rather than trying to reconcile them or choose between them, I'll create a process where each perspective can be fully present and heard. We'll look for what wants to emerge from the interaction between perspectives, not what

any single perspective dictates. I'll help us notice where different framings complement each other and where they create productive tension. When decisions must be made, we'll make them transparently, acknowledging which perspectives are being honored and which are being set aside in this instance, with commitment to continue the relationship so different perspectives can be foregrounded at different moments." In practice, this might involve multiple forms of engagement—structured dialogue, experiential learning, collaborative design, contemplative practice—each honoring different ways of knowing. Stakeholders often experience such facilitation as remarkably inclusive despite—or because of—its refusal to force premature unity.

Implications for development: At E8, the person's perspective-taking capacity is mature. What supports continued development is not more skill training but contexts where this capacity can be exercised at scale and depth—leading transformation in complex multi-stakeholder systems, facilitating reconciliation across deep divides, engaging with genuinely wicked problems. The person learns through doing increasingly difficult complexity work, supported by community of others operating at similar developmental levels.

Transpersonal perspective-taking: fluid immediacy

Construct-aware and Unitive stages (E9-E10): Perspectival fluidity

At transpersonal stages, perspective-taking becomes more immediate and less mediated by conscious effort. At E9, there's awareness that perspectives arise and dissolve naturally based on context, and the person can shift between them fluidly without strong identification with any. They recognize their own perspective-taking as itself a constructed capacity operating within awareness.

At E10, the very notion of taking perspectives begins to dissolve. There's less sense of a separate self that deliberately adopts different viewpoints and more sense of perspectives moving through awareness naturally. The person may spontaneously sense into what others are experiencing without deliberate perspective-taking effort—not through psychic powers but through very subtle attention to the field of interaction.

Paradoxically, this can manifest as very simple and direct engagement. Where earlier stages involve elaborate perspective-taking processes, transpersonal stages may work with remarkable immediacy—sensing what's needed and responding without extensive analytical framework. Others often experience this as being deeply seen and met, though the person isn't doing anything that would be recognized as technique.

Stakeholder engagement example: A transpersonal facilitator might work with great simplicity: showing up present, asking questions that shift how people see, creating space for emergence, responding to what's alive in the moment. When asked about their method, they might say: "I try to be available to what's actually happening rather than managing toward predetermined outcomes. When I listen to stakeholders, I'm not taking their perspective in the sense of constructing their viewpoint in my mind—I'm just with them, and understanding arises naturally from presence. Different ways of seeing are just here—they're not possessions of particular people but patterns flowing through the collective field." This can sound mystical, but stakeholders often report such facilitation as extraordinarily effective, creating openings that more methodical approaches missed.

Implications for development: At these stages, conventional development language becomes less applicable. The person is less interested in acquiring better perspective-taking skills and more interested in letting perspectives flow naturally without interference. What supports them

is usually deep contemplative practice, serving contexts of genuine need where their presence can make a difference, and freedom from structures that require constant explanation of their approach.

Summary and implications

This examination of perspective skills across developmental stages reveals several crucial insights:

First, perspective-taking is not one skill but a developmental sequence. Role-based perspective-taking (E5), principled perspective analysis (E6), radical perspectivalism (E7), dialectical integration (E8), and fluid immediacy (E9+) are qualitatively different capacities requiring different structures of consciousness. Training that assumes participants can engage with multiple incommensurable perspectives will fail if most are still developing role-based capacity.

Second, most diversity and inclusion work assumes E6+ capacity. Genuine engagement across paradigm differences—working productively with stakeholders who have fundamentally different ways of making meaning—requires at least E7-E8 capacity. Yet many organizations expect E5-E6 employees to succeed at this, then blame individuals or provide more training when predictable difficulties arise. Understanding the developmental requirements helps set realistic expectations and provide appropriate support.

Third, perspective-taking and power dynamics interact complexly. At E5-E6, people may sincerely believe they're understanding diverse perspectives while actually assimilating them to familiar categories or evaluating them against unexamined frameworks. Only at E7+ does genuine awareness of epistemic colonialism, standpoint theory, and positionality typically emerge—and even then, it can become its own trap if it doesn't integrate with capacity for decisive action. Supporting development means helping people see their blind spots without shaming them for developmentally typical limitations.

Fourth, facilitating across difference requires matching developmental level. An E6 facilitator working with E7-E8 stakeholders will struggle because they'll try to resolve differences that stakeholders recognize as incommensurable. An E7 facilitator working with E5-E6 stakeholders may overwhelm them with perspectival complexity when they need clearer structure. An E8 facilitator can work across range because they can meet people where they are while holding more complex possibilities. This doesn't mean only E8 people should facilitate—it means we should match complexity of facilitation to developmental readiness of group and provide facilitators with developmental support appropriate to their edge.

Fifth, perspective skills are foundational for collaborative sustainability work. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality cannot be addressed within single paradigms—they require genuine collaboration across different ways of knowing and being. This doesn't just mean getting people with different perspectives in the room; it means cultivating the developmental capacity to work productively with paradigmatic difference. Organizations serious about transformative sustainability must invest in vertical development of perspective skills, not just horizontal training in diversity awareness.

Finally, the IDG definition itself reflects sophisticated capacity. The ability to "learn from diverse perspectives and integrate insights into reflective sense-making and action" describes something beyond basic perspective-taking. It implies capacity to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously (E7+), integrate them without collapsing their differences (E8), and translate this into coordinated action (E8). This is not criticism but recognition: the IDG framework appropriately identifies what's needed. Practitioners must recognize that building this capacity

requires supporting vertical development over years, not just training in perspective-taking techniques over days.

Having examined three IDG qualities in detail—Self-Awareness, Complexity Awareness, and Perspective Skills—we turn next to qualities that are even more fundamentally expressions of identity structure: Connectedness and Inner Compass, the two qualities that the original IDG framework explicitly placed in the "Identifications" category.

5. CONNECTEDNESS - THE EXPANSION OF IDENTITY BOUNDARIES

Connectedness appears in the IDG framework's "Relating" dimension, defined as "Feeling a sense of belonging to a larger whole, such as humanity, the planet's web of life, and the spiritual dimensions of existence." In the original IDG survey, this quality ranked fourth in importance, reflecting recognition that sustainability challenges require expanding our sense of care and commitment beyond immediate self-interest to encompass larger systems and longer time-frames.

In the original IDG report, the author explicitly identified Connectedness as one of three qualities placed in the "Identifications" category, noting: "This is one of the items in the IDG framework that is most profoundly intertwined with felt identity." This recognition was crucial: Connectedness is not a skill that can be trained or a value that can be adopted. It represents a transformation in the structure of identity itself—in what boundaries define the self and what falls outside those boundaries.

The developmental progression of Connectedness reveals perhaps most clearly the fundamental principle of vertical development: what changes is not how much connection the person feels but what can be experienced as connected with. At each stage, there is a characteristic boundary between "self" or "us" and "other" or "them." Development is the progressive expansion and eventual dissolution of these boundaries. What was "other" becomes part of "self"; what was "outside" becomes "inside." This is not learned; it is grown into.

Early conventional connectedness: dependency and utility

Early stages (E3-E4): Bounded self

At pre-conventional stages, identity is centered on the physical body and its immediate needs. The boundary of self is essentially the skin—what's inside is "me," what's outside is "not-me." Connection in any meaningful sense doesn't yet exist; there is only dependency and utility.

The person experiences others in terms of their impact on the self: as sources of satisfaction or frustration, as helpers or threats, as means to ends. There may be strong attachment to particular people—mother, primary caregivers—but this is possessive dependence rather than genuine connection. The other person is valued for what they provide, not recognized as a center of experience in their own right.

The natural world is experienced purely instrumentally—as resource or obstacle, as useful or threatening. There is no sense of being part of nature; nature is simply environment that either serves or endangers the self. The notion of connection to "the planet's web of life" is literally meaningless at this stage—these are just words without experiential referent.

Even abstract collectives like "humanity" or "future generations" are cognitively inaccessible. The person can only relate to concrete individuals who are present and who have direct impact on immediate experience. Sustainability as concept makes no sense because it requires caring about outcomes beyond one's own lifetime and about people one will never meet.

Organizational example: An employee at this level engages with sustainability initiatives only if there are immediate personal consequences—rewards for compliance or punishments for violation. They might follow recycling rules if monitored but see no intrinsic reason to do so. Appeals to "our responsibility to future generations" or "our connection to the earth" are empty

rhetoric that produces no resonance. The organization is not experienced as "us" but as "them"—an external structure that provides paycheck and imposes requirements.

Implications for development: Connectedness practices—gratitude exercises, nature immersion, reflection on interdependence—will be ineffective at this stage because the identity structure cannot accommodate them. What can help is building reliable relationships where the person experiences consistent care, which creates foundation for eventual recognition of others as sources of value beyond utility. Immediate concrete consequences and clear behavioral expectations work; appeals to connection and care do not. The developmental work is creating enough safety and stability that the person can begin to differentiate from immediate survival needs.

Conventional connectedness: group belonging

Conformist stage (E4): Social identity

At E4, identity expands to include social roles and group memberships. The person now experiences themselves as part of larger wholes: family, team, organization, community, nation. This is genuine connection—the person feels that what happens to the group happens to them, that the group's welfare is their welfare. The boundary of self has expanded from skin to include "us."

However, this connection is bounded by in-group/out-group distinctions. Connection is felt toward "our people," with clear boundaries defining who belongs and who doesn't. The person can feel deep solidarity with family members, strong loyalty to their organization, and patriotic connection to their nation—but these connections are specifically to the in-group, implicitly or explicitly excluding out-groups.

Connection to nature or "the web of life" at this stage is typically mediated through group values. If the person's group cares about environmental protection, they will adopt that concern as part of group membership. "We Swedes care about sustainability" or "Our company values environmental stewardship" expresses connection as loyalty to group identity rather than direct felt relationship to the natural world.

The notion of connection to "humanity" is abstract and distant at E4. The person can feel sympathy for suffering people shown on news—this is real emotional response—but it doesn't carry the same weight as connection to actual group members. When there's conflict between in-group welfare and broader human welfare, in-group will reliably be prioritized because that's where identity is invested.

Organizational example: An E4 employee experiences strong connection to their immediate team and organization. They feel proud when the company succeeds and concerned when it struggles. They'll make sacrifices for "us"—staying late to help teammates, defending the company's reputation, participating in corporate sustainability initiatives because "that's who we are as a company." However, this connection is bounded. They may feel competitive toward other departments, indifferent to impacts on external stakeholders, and primarily concerned with how sustainability work affects their team's standing. The company's environmental commitments are experienced as "our values" rather than as response to intrinsic worth of the natural world.

Implications for development: This is the stage where group-based sustainability engagement is most effective. Appealing to team identity ("we're the sustainability leaders"), organizational culture ("this is how we do things here"), or national pride ("our country's environmental reputation") creates motivation. Nature connection practices that happen in group context can

be powerful because they're experienced as bonding with "our people" around "our values." What begins to challenge the adequacy of E5 connectedness is encountering genuine care for out-group members—perhaps through direct relationship with someone from a group previously seen as "other," or recognition that in-group welfare depends on cooperation with out-groups.

Conscientious stage (E6): Ideological connection

At E6, identity is defined by chosen principles, values, and commitments rather than by group membership. This enables a kind of universal connection based on shared humanity or common principles. The person can feel genuine concern for all humans as bearers of rights or as participants in the human condition, not just for members of their in-group.

This brings capacity for moral universalism—recognizing that all humans have equal worth regardless of group membership. The E6 person can commit to sustainability based on principle: responsibility to future generations, duty to protect biodiversity, obligation to address global inequality. This principled commitment can motivate significant effort and sacrifice.

Connection to the natural world at E6 can be quite sophisticated—understanding intellectually that humans are part of the ecosystem, recognizing intrinsic value in non-human life, appreciating the beauty and complexity of natural systems. The person can grasp intellectually that protecting the environment serves human long-term interests and respects the inherent worth of other species.

However, there's a characteristic limitation: this remains connection to abstractions rather than experiential inclusion. The E6 person experiences themselves as a principled individual who cares about humanity, future generations, and the environment—but they're still fundamentally separate from these larger wholes, relating to them through values and commitments rather than through identity. They care about the whole; they don't yet experience themselves as part of the whole in a way that makes the whole's welfare inseparable from their own.

This can create a particular quality of sustainability engagement: dedicated, principled, sometimes moralistic. The person works hard on behalf of the planet or future generations, but there can be an effortful quality to it—doing the right thing, fulfilling responsibility, living up to ideals. It's genuine commitment but not yet the effortless care that flows from experiential inclusion.

Organizational example: An E6 sustainability director is deeply committed based on principle. They work tirelessly because "it's the right thing to do," "we have responsibility to future generations," "all humans deserve a livable planet." They can articulate sophisticated arguments for why the organization should prioritize sustainability even when it's costly. They feel genuine concern for people affected by climate change globally, not just those in their community. However, their engagement has a quality of duty and effort. They might say: "I feel responsible for doing everything I can." There's a subtle separation: "I" who feels responsible, and "the planet/future generations/the poor" who are recipients of that responsibility. The person is working on behalf of larger wholes, not yet experiencing their welfare as inseparable from those wholes.

Implications for development: E6 is where most sophisticated conventional sustainability engagement operates. These individuals are invaluable—they provide principled leadership, maintain commitment through difficulty, and articulate moral imperatives. However, they often experience burnout because the effort is sustained by will rather than flowing from being. What

supports movement toward E7-E8 is often experiences that reveal the limits of principled effort: recognizing that analysis and good intentions don't resolve persistent dilemmas; encountering genuine cultural difference in how humans relate to nature; or personal practices (meditation, nature immersion, psychedelic experience, near-death encounter) that provide direct experiential taste of non-separation. The person needs experiences that shift connection from something they believe to something they are.

Post-conventional connectedness: systemic inclusion

Individualistic stage (E7): Deconstructed identity

At E7, the person recognizes that all identifications—including connection to larger wholes—are constructed. They can see how their sense of connection to nation, humanity, or nature is shaped by culture, narrative, and choice. This awareness can be liberating but also destabilizing.

The E7 person can "try on" different identity constructions: experiencing themselves as autonomous individual, as node in social network, as participant in humanity's story, as part of the biosphere. Each framing is recognized as partial and perspectival. This creates flexibility but can also create a kind of disconnection—if all connections are constructed, which are real? The person may feel simultaneously connected to everything (intellectually) and to nothing (experientially).

There's often acute awareness at E7 of how connection is commodified and performed in contemporary culture: corporate greenwashing, spiritual bypassing, performative environmentalism. This critical awareness is valuable but can become cynical, making it difficult to rest in simple, genuine connection. The person might think: "I feel connected to nature, but is this real or just another constructed narrative I've absorbed from environmental discourse?"

Despite or because of this deconstruction, E7 often brings powerful experiences of connection—moments where the constructed self dissolves and there's direct experience of non-separation. However, these tend to be temporary states that the person can't yet stabilize as enduring structure. The glimpse is real, but it doesn't yet reorganize identity.

Organizational example: An E7 consultant might say: "I notice how organizations construct narratives of connection—'we're all one team,' 'we care about our community'—and how these narratives serve particular interests while obscuring others. I see how my own sense of connection to sustainability work is partly genuine and partly a story I've built to make meaning of my career. Indigenous peoples I've worked with have completely different ways of experiencing connection to land that don't fit Western frameworks of environmentalism. When I'm in nature, sometimes I feel genuinely part of something larger, but then I watch myself constructing that feeling into a narrative that fits expectations about what authentic connection should look like. What's real? What's constructed? I'm not sure the distinction is even valid." This sophisticated awareness is valuable but can become paralyzing if it doesn't evolve toward integration.

Implications for development: E7's deconstructive relationship to connectedness needs to evolve toward reconstruction. What helps is not more practices aimed at creating connection (the person is already aware these are constructed) but support for allowing connection to be present despite or through its constructed nature. Contemplative practices that emphasize being rather than doing, engagement with complexity that requires committed action despite uncertainty, and relationships with teachers or communities who embody integrated connectedness can all help. The person needs to discover that connection can be both constructed and real, both narrative and direct experience, without the paradox collapsing meaning.

Autonomous stage (E8): Systemic inclusion

At E8, connectedness achieves a new quality. Identity begins to naturally include awareness of embeddedness in larger systems. The person experiences themselves not as separate individual who relates to systems but as participant in systems, as local expression of larger patterns. This is not abstract understanding but felt reality.

The boundary between self and system becomes permeable. What happens to the system is experienced as happening to oneself, not because of moral identification but because the person recognizes themselves as constituted by their relationships and context. Harm to the ecosystem is experienced as harm to oneself because one's own existence depends on and is part of ecosystem health. Injustice to marginalized communities is experienced as distortion of the social fabric that one is woven into.

This is worldcentric rather than sociocentric or ethnocentric consciousness. The "us" that defines identity expands to include all humans, future generations, and the more-than-human world. This isn't achieved through moral effort or values adoption but through transformation in how identity itself is structured. The person doesn't work on behalf of the whole; they work as the whole working through this particular form.

Importantly, this doesn't mean dissolving all boundaries or becoming uniformly concerned with everything. The person still has particular roles, relationships, and responsibilities that get prioritized attention. But these particulars are held within awareness of the larger whole, and decisions are made with awareness of impact on multiple scales—immediate and distant, human and non-human, present and future.

Sustainability engagement at E8 has a different quality than at E6. It's not effortful duty but natural expression. The person doesn't have to remember to care about climate change or convince themselves it matters—it's experientially obvious because their own well-being is inseparable from planetary well-being. Action flows from being rather than from should.

Organizational example: An E8 leader embodies connectedness in how they work. When making decisions, they naturally consider impact on multiple stakeholders—employees, community, ecosystems, future generations—not as separate interests to balance but as aspects of the whole system that includes themselves. They experience the organization not as separate entity but as pattern of relationships continuously co-created with environment. When asked about their motivation for sustainability work, they might say something simple: "How could I not care about this? My well-being and the planet's well-being aren't separate things. I'm not saving the world—I'm participating in the world's evolution, doing what I can from this particular position." Others often experience such leaders as exceptionally caring and committed while also being somehow lighter about it—less burdened by responsibility because they're not carrying it alone.

Implications for development: At E8, connectedness is mature. What supports its continued deepening is living into it through increasingly complex and challenging circumstances, relationship with others operating at similar or more advanced levels, and practices that support presence and acceptance of what is. The person benefits less from connectedness exercises and more from contexts where they can live and lead from this consciousness at scale.

Transpersonal connectedness: non-dual awareness

Construct-aware and Unitive stages (E9-E10): Permeable boundaries

At transpersonal stages, the very notion of connection as relationship between self and other begins to dissolve. At E9, there's explicit awareness that the separate self is itself a construction, and moments of direct experience of non-separation become more frequent and stable. The person recognizes that "I am connected to the whole" is still dualistic—there's an "I" that relates to "the whole." Deeper truth is that the boundary between I and whole is itself constructed.

At E10, identity becomes fluid and transparent. The person experiences themselves as temporary localization within the larger field of being. There are still individual thoughts, feelings, and actions—the person-form continues to function—but there's less sense of a separate self that possesses these. Cook-Greuter describes it as "feelings of belonging and feelings of one's own separateness and uniqueness experienced without undue tension"—paradoxically both deeply individual and completely non-separate.

Connectedness at these stages isn't something the person has or cultivates; it's the nature of experience. There's direct perception of the web of life not as metaphor but as lived reality. The boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, living and non-living become permeable or dissolve entirely in some moments.

This can manifest as very simple, direct relationship to life. The person may be less interested in talking about connection or belonging and more simply present with what is. Action still happens—often quite effective action—but it flows from being rather than from an agent trying to maintain connection.

Organizational example: A transpersonal leader might work with great naturalness. They don't talk much about connection or values; they simply act in ways that reflect care for the whole. When asked about their sense of connection, they might say something paradoxical: "There's nobody here who's connected or not connected—there's just this happening. The form that appears as 'me' is part of the larger pattern. Care for the whole isn't my quality; it's what's flowing through. Sometimes that care manifests as fierce protection, sometimes as allowing difficulty, sometimes as celebrating beauty. I don't own it." This might sound mystical or confusing to conventional consciousness, but people who work with such individuals often report feeling deeply met and sensing that they're in the presence of someone who genuinely sees no separation.

Implications for development: At these stages, the language of development becomes less applicable. The person is not trying to become more connected; they're resting in and as connection itself. What supports them is usually deep practice, teaching or service that allows this consciousness to flow through them, and freedom from structures that require them to perform conventional identity.

Summary and implications

This examination of Connectedness across developmental stages reveals insights crucial for sustainability work:

First, Connectedness is not a skill that can be trained but an emergent property of identity structure. The expansion from bounded self (E3-E4) through social identity (E5) and principled universalism (E6) to systemic inclusion (E8) and non-dual awareness (E9-E10) cannot be installed through exercises or persuasion. It unfolds through developmental transformation that

takes years and requires both challenge and support. Organizations that expect employees to "feel connected to the planet" without supporting vertical development are asking for something structurally impossible for many.

Second, what counts as connection differs fundamentally across stages. Connection to "the web of life" means dependency at E3-E4, group values at E5, principled commitment at E6, experiential inclusion at E8, and non-dual awareness at E9-E10. These are not variations on a theme but qualitatively different phenomena. Training that assumes participants can feel connected to abstractions like "humanity" or "future generations" will fail for those at E3-E5 whose identity structure is organized around concrete relationships and in-group membership.

Third, genuine worldcentric concern requires post-conventional development. The IDG definition—connection to "humanity, the planet's web of life, and the spiritual dimensions of existence"—describes E8+ consciousness. Below this, people can have concern for broader wholes (E6 principle, E5 group value) but not the experiential inclusion where the whole's welfare is inseparable from one's own. Most sustainability initiatives assume or require this worldcentric consciousness but are implemented in organizational contexts where most people operate from E5-E6 center of gravity. This developmental gap is a primary reason sustainability transformation remains so difficult.

Fourth, connectedness practices work differently at different stages. Nature immersion, gratitude practices, interdependence reflection—these have different effects depending on developmental level. At E5, they strengthen group bonding around shared values. At E6, they reinforce principled commitment. At E7, they provide glimpses of non-separation that can't yet be stabilized. At E8, they support the consciousness that's already present. None of these effects are wrong, but practitioners should be clear about what's developmentally possible and not mistake E5-E6 engagement for E8 consciousness.

Fifth, the relationship between connection and action shifts across stages. At E6, action flows from principle and requires effort to sustain. At E8, action flows from being and has more natural quality. This difference matters for preventing burnout and building sustainable sustainability movements. People operating from E6 consciousness need support structures that prevent depletion. People operating from E8+ consciousness need freedom to respond naturally without bureaucratic constraint. Understanding these differences helps organizations support people appropriately.

Sixth, collective connectedness reflects organizational stage. An organization with E5 center of gravity will experience connection primarily as team loyalty and company culture. An E6 organization can articulate universal values but often operates from those values as principles rather than as lived reality. Genuine organizational embodiment of worldcentric connectedness requires critical mass at E7-E8. This is rare but not impossible—and when it exists, such organizations often lead sustainability transformation in their sectors.

Finally, supporting development of connectedness requires long-term investment. Moving from E5 group connection to E8 systemic inclusion typically takes years, not months. It requires experiences that challenge existing identity boundaries—cross-cultural immersion, contemplative practice, engagement with complexity that reveals interdependence, developmental relationships that support identity expansion. Organizations serious about cultivating genuine connectedness must commit to long-term developmental support, not just training programs. This is significant investment, but it may be necessary investment if we're to build the consciousness that sustainability transformation requires.

Having examined Connectedness, we turn to its companion quality from the original "Identifications" category: Inner Compass, which reveals the developmental transformation of moral authority and the evolution of what "the good of the whole" can mean.

6. INNER COMPASS – THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL AUTHORITY

Why this quality matters

Inner Compass, together with Connectedness, constitutes the second of the two IDG qualities that Thomas Jordan explicitly placed under the category "Identifications" in his original theoretical systematization. This is of critical importance: Inner Compass is not a skill that can be trained, but rather an emergent property arising from the transformation of identity structure and the locus of moral authority. This quality reveals one of the most fundamental dimensions of vertical development—the shift from external to internal to universal authority.

The IDG framework defines Inner Compass as "having a deeply felt sense of responsibility and commitment to values and purposes relating to the good of the whole." But what does it really mean to have an "inner compass"? Where does its direction come from? What constitutes its magnetic north? These questions cannot be answered without understanding the structural transformation of meaning-making that occurs through the stages of ego development.

Inner Compass represents a particularly interesting paradox for sustainability work: many who work with global issues perceive themselves as driven by deep values concerning "the good of the whole," yet these values can manifest in qualitatively different ways depending on the developmental stage of the individual. An E6 leader acting from principled convictions about environmental protection and an E8 leader experiencing the planet's well-being as intrinsically connected to their own will make decisions that look superficially similar but spring from fundamentally different structures of moral authority.

The developmental progression

Pre-conventional (E3) and early conventional stage (E4): External authority

At the pre-conventional and early conventional stages, no genuine "inner" compass exists in the sense intended by the IDG framework. Rules and values are experienced as imposed from outside, either through direct power (E3) or through social authority (E4).

At the self-protective stage (E3), rules are followed or broken depending on what serves the individual's own interests. Reward and punishment guide behavior. "The good of the whole" is a meaningless concept—there is only "my good" and possibly "what those who have power over me demand." Motivation is primarily fear of sanctions or desire for reward, not internalized values.

Causes and blame are consistently placed outside the individual. There is no genuine remorse or sense of responsibility, only a practical calculus: what works to maximize personal advantage and minimize punishment? In organizations, this manifests as compliance with sustainability policies only when surveillance is present, or when there are tangible personal incentives.

At the conformist stage (E4), a form of internalization begins, but what is internalized is the group's rules and authority figures' expectations. The individual identifies with the community—family, work group, company, nation—and largely accepts their values, opinions, and worldviews without questioning them.

Rules are followed because they exist, because authorities say they should be followed. "The good of the whole" is defined as what the authority says is good, or as what is good for my group. There is a strong need for approval and belonging. The world is divided into simple categories with clear ideas about how things should be or be done.

What is critical for E4 is that there is not yet a differentiated inner world as the foundation for values. Consciousness is directed outward—toward how one is perceived, toward group norms, toward the visible and external. An E4 employee follows the company's sustainability commitments because "this is what we do here," to fit in, to be a good member of the organization. The commitment is genuine but unreflective—it is not "my" commitment but "ours."

Example: A middle manager at a manufacturing company strictly implements waste sorting in his department because leadership has said "we should be a sustainable company." He carefully monitors that rules are followed, becomes upset when someone throws plastic in the wrong bin, and feels pride that his department performs best on the metrics. But if he changes jobs to a company where sustainability is not emphasized, the commitment vanishes—the compass was not internal but external, anchored in group identity and authority.

Self-aware stage (E5): Group-based internal guidance

The self-aware transitional stage (E5) marks the beginning of genuine internalization, but what is internalized still derives primarily from group norms and social expectations. What emerges is an "inner compass" in the sense that the individual begins to experience their own values, but these values are largely shaped by and oriented toward the social context's norms and ideals.

E5 is aware of themselves as a person with their own opinions and preferences, but these are grounded in what is right according to accepted norms. There is a strong desire for independence and equality—but within the framework of conventional value systems. Morality is expressed as helpfulness, altruism, and engagement with larger social issues, but in general terms reflecting society's accepted discourse.

"The good of the whole" can now be understood conceptually as something beyond the immediate group's interest—humanity, the environment, future generations—but this understanding is still mediated through the group's values. One cares about the environment because "we Swedes care about sustainability," or because "modern, enlightened people care about the planet." The commitment is genuine but still primarily sociocentric—anchored in group identity rather than in an autonomous value base.

The inner compass points toward the group's welfare and approval. It takes courage to act according to these internalized values, especially when it means going against other groups or authorities—but E5 still struggles to act against the primary reference group's consensus. The sense of responsibility is strong but limited to the social sphere one identifies with.

Example: An HR director at a larger company actively drives diversity and inclusion work because she genuinely values equality and justice—values she grew up with in her progressive academic environment. She experiences these values as her own, but when she encounters radically different cultural perspectives on individualism and collectivism in the company's global expansion, she experiences these as wrong or outdated rather than as legitimate alternative value systems. Her inner compass is strong but still primarily shaped by and oriented toward her cultural and social context.

Conscientious stage (E6): Principled conscience

The transition to the conscientious stage (E6) represents a dramatic shift—here emerges for the first time an ego that is "constructed" independently of others, according to Loevinger's classic description. This is marked by self-evaluated norms and values in which personal responsibility is grounded. A decision is made not because others want it, but because the individual themselves sees and feels that it is right.

This is genuine internalization of universal principles. E6 has not only internalized rules but also the formulation of the rules—the individual chooses which principles should be followed and why. There are long-term, self-formulated goals and ideals. Strong personal responsibility-taking and differentiated self-criticism characterize the stage. E6 feels responsible for other people's welfare and is prepared to intervene in their interest.

"The good of the whole" is now defined through rational and ethical principles—human rights, environmental protection, social justice, intergenerational responsibility. These principles are experienced as objectively valid, not as culturally constructed. E6 can act on conviction even against group pressure, has courage to stand for their principles, and experiences strong guilt when their own standard is not met.

Here emerges what is often perceived as the "ideal" inner compass for sustainability work: self-chosen, principled, long-term, universalistic. E6 leaders often drive change work with clarity and conviction, can articulate clear values, hold themselves and others accountable to high standards.

But the E6 stage also contains an inherent limitation that often becomes invisible precisely because the stage feels so mature: there is often rigid attachment to ONE right framework. E6 has difficulty recognizing that their own principles are culturally constructed and context-dependent. There is a tendency to experience one's own principle-based understanding as objective truth rather than as one possible interpretation.

The E6 paradox for sustainability work:

| Strengths | Limitations |
|----------------------------------|--|
| ✓ Strong moral conviction | X Difficulty with genuine dialogue across worldview boundaries |
| ✓ Personal responsibility-taking | X Can be experienced as arrogant or colonizing |
| ✓ Principled action | X Rigidity—"there is one right way" |
| ✓ Can act against group pressure | X Projects "the good of the whole" from single paradigm |
| ✓ Long-term orientation | X Blind to own subjectivity behind objectivity |

This manifests concretely in sustainability work when E6 leaders, with the best intentions, implement "science-based" or "evidence-based" solutions that implicitly carry values and assumptions from a specific cultural and epistemological framework. They act for "the good of the whole"—but defined from their own, culturally constructed understanding of what constitutes the greater whole and its good.

An E6 sustainability consultant might, for example, drive implementation of circular economy as the obvious way forward, with rigorous principles and measurable goals, but struggle to genuinely engage with alternative paradigms that emphasize other dimensions of well-being or that start from relational ontology rather than mechanistic worldview. The principles feel universal rather than as a particular cultural expression of values.

Example: A sustainability director at a global company has developed a comprehensive ESG strategy based on established research and international frameworks. She acts from deep conviction that this is right, regardless of what others think. When local offices in different cultures express alternative priorities or perspectives—perhaps emphasizing community well-being over individual rights, or relational values over efficiency metrics—she experiences this as resistance to "the obviously right" rather than as legitimate alternative value systems. Her inner compass is strong and principled, but it points toward a specific culturally constructed "north" that she experiences as universal.

Post-conventional stage (E7): Relativized compass

The individualist stage (E7) involves an often tumultuous discovery: all moral frameworks are constructed, partial, and context-dependent. E7 realizes their own subjectivity and increasingly takes it into account. There is no "view from nowhere," no absolute objective ground for values. Different cultures, different paradigms, different life experiences generate legitimate but incommensurable value systems.

This can lead to deep uncertainty about one's own compass: if all frameworks are constructed, what then guides action? If "the good of the whole" is defined differently in different paradigms, who am I to say which is right? E7 can experience a kind of moral paralysis—too much awareness of uncertainty, too little firm ground to stand on.

E7 becomes skilled at deconstructing—showing how values and principles are culturally conditioned, how "objective" analyses carry hidden assumptions, how "the good of the whole" is always defined from some particular position. This is invaluable work that challenges E6's sometimes rigid universalism. But E7 has not yet learned reconstruction—how to act with commitment despite acknowledged uncertainty, how to choose a value base knowing it is partial.

The inner compass becomes wavering. E7 can become overthinking, overanalytical, stuck in infinite regress of justifications. "Who am I to say what is good for humanity when it's just my cultural programming?" This stage is often a necessary transition—a dissolution of E6's premature certainty—but cannot be a stable position for effective sustainability work.

Example: A former E6 activist undergoes during her doctoral studies in critical sustainability studies a fundamental reevaluation. She realizes how her previous "obvious" sustainability agenda carried Western assumptions about progress, individualism, and nature. She becomes skilled at deconstructing sustainability discourses, showing hidden power structures, problematizing universal claims. But when asked to lead a concrete sustainability project, she experiences paralysis: every proposal feels compromised by unavoidable assumptions and partial perspectives. Her inner compass has been deconstructed but not yet reconstructed at a new level.

Post-conventional stage (E8): World-centric integrity

The autonomous stage (E8) represents an integration of E6's ability to act from values and E7's awareness of their constructed nature. This is not a regression to E6's certainty but a transcendence that includes both.

E8 can act from deeply held values while simultaneously holding them lightly—with awareness of their partiality but without being paralyzed by this insight. E8 is aware that their values and beliefs are culturally conditioned and therefore relative, but can still act from them with integrity and commitment. There is a deep respect for mutual dependencies and interconnections.

"The good of the whole" now genuinely encompasses all humans, future generations, and ecosystems—not as a moral requirement but as a natural extension of what identity now includes. This is no longer a matter of principle but of identity: the well-being of the larger whole is experienced as intrinsically connected to one's own well-being, because the boundary between "self" and "larger whole" has become permeable.

E8 can engage across paradigm boundaries without needing agreement on foundations. The inner compass points toward world-centric values, but E8 understands that other compasses can point differently and still be valid from their perspective. There is the ability to hold multiple frameworks simultaneously without collapsing the differences, to use perspectives as tools without being limited by any single one.

The sometimes excessive sense of responsibility found in the middle developmental stages (E4-E6) disappears. E8 can fully accept others' "otherness" and appreciate their desire for self-determination, without the moral upset that people feel at earlier stages. This is achieved primarily through fully recognizing and acknowledging inner conflicts and contradictions rather than projecting them outward or denying them.

Example: A leader of an international sustainability network works with partners from vastly different cultural and paradigmatic contexts—industrialists and indigenous leaders, natural scientists and contemplative traditions, economists and ecologists. She acts from deep values around planetary well-being but can genuinely listen to and work with radically different perspectives on what this means. When a partner expresses value foundations that fundamentally differ from her own, she does not experience this as threat or error, but as legitimate alternative perspective. She can facilitate spaces where incommensurable worldviews meet productively, because she holds her own values lightly enough to create space for others. Her inner compass is deep and stable, but not exclusive.

Late post-conventional stage (E9+): Being as compass

At the highest developmental stages (E9 and beyond), the quality of "inner compass" changes further. It becomes less an experience of "having" a compass and more of "being" responsive. Action flows from presence and awareness rather than from principles or calculations.

E9 is aware of the ego as a constructed phenomenon and perceives egocentrism as a limitation of their own experience. There is decreased identification with the contents of consciousness. The distinction between self-interest and universal well-being dissolves—not through moral effort but through a fundamental restructuring of what is experienced as "self."

Cook-Greuter describes this as a shift from "achieving" to "being"—from accomplishing or realizing something to being present to what is. Spontaneous right action arises from this presence rather than from calculation or principled application.

This is not an absence of values or agency—on the contrary, actions from this stage can be powerful and effective. But they are not motivated by "following one's inner compass" in the conventional sense. They arise more naturally, less driven by ego-based projects of self-actualization or moral correctness.

Example: An elder advisor to several major sustainability initiatives acts with remarkable clarity and effectiveness, but without the drivenness that characterized her earlier career. When asked about her values or principles, she finds it difficult to articulate them in the way she once could. "I simply do what needs to be done in the situation," she says. This may sound like evasion, but those who work with her experience a deep wisdom and appropriateness in her response to complex situations. Her "inner compass" has become transparent—present but not an object of conscious attention or control.

The critical distinction

The IDG framework's definition of Inner Compass—"having a deeply felt sense of responsibility and commitment to values and purposes relating to the good of the whole"—describes something whose meaning and possibility changes fundamentally across developmental stages.

For Inner Compass to manifest in the sense the IDG framework intends requires:

Internalized rather than external authority – This requires at least E5-E6. Earlier stages lack the structural capacity that enables values to be experienced as "inner" rather than externally imposed or group-based.

World-centric rather than sociocentric scope – "The good of the whole" as genuinely including all humanity, future generations, and ecosystems requires E7-E8. Earlier stages can intellectually understand and value these scopes, but cannot fully include them in their operative moral awareness.

Integrated rather than absolutist principle-holding – The ability to act from deep values while holding them as partial perspectives, and to engage productively across paradigm boundaries, requires E8+.

This does not mean that people at earlier stages lack moral commitment or cannot contribute valuably to sustainability work. It means that the quality of their "inner compass" structurally differs from what the IDG definition suggests.

An E5 employee can be passionately engaged in the organization's sustainability goals—but this engagement is anchored in group identity and social norms rather than in an autonomous internal value base oriented toward universal principles.

An E6 leader can have a strong, principled inner compass that drives important change work—but this compass may point toward a culturally specific "north" experienced as universal, creating difficulties in genuine dialogue across worldview boundaries.

An E7 person can have deep understanding of values' relativity and cultural contingency—but lacks yet the integrated capacity that enables committed action despite this insight.

It is only at the E8 stage that all three dimensions of Inner Compass converge: genuinely internalized, world-centric in scope, and integrated rather than absolutist in its principle-holding.

Implications for sustainability work

These developmental differences have concrete consequences for how we design and drive sustainability initiatives.

Design of values-based leadership

Many values-based leadership trainings presuppose and reinforce E6 capacity: they help participants articulate their core values, act principally, hold themselves accountable to high standards. This is valuable for E5→E6 and E6 individuals. But such programs can inadvertently reinforce E6 righteousness rather than develop genuine E8 Inner Compass if they don't also cultivate:

- Awareness of values' cultural construction
- Ability to hold values lightly while acting from them
- Capacity to engage productively with incommensurable value systems
- Understanding of the difference between principled certainty (E6) and integrated integrity (E8)

Different quality of "commitment to the good of the whole"

How leaders relate to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) illustrates this difference clearly:

E5-E6 orientation: SDGs as THE framework—the objective, science-based, universally valid way to define and measure global well-being. Strong commitment, but rigidity around the framework and difficulty genuinely valuing alternative perspectives on well-being and development.

E7 orientation: Deep awareness of SDGs as a particular culturally constructed framework with built-in assumptions about progress, measurability, and development. Can lead to cynicism or action paralysis: "Who am I to impose this framework?"

E8 orientation: SDGs as ONE useful framework among several possible ones, with genuine value for coordination and communication, but not the only legitimate way to define global well-being. Can work effectively within the framework while holding space open for alternative perspectives and measures.

Collective capacity and transformative change

For transformative sustainability change requiring collaboration across paradigm boundaries—between industrialized and developing countries, between scientific and indigenous knowledge traditions, between different cultural value systems—a critical mass of post-conventional (E7-E8) capacity is needed.

E5-E6 dialogues tend to seek agreement around principles, which is impossible when genuine worldview differences exist. E7-E8 dialogues can work productively with and through paradigmatic differences, create hybrid solutions, hold creative tension between incommensurable perspectives.

This doesn't mean E5-E6 leaders can't contribute valuably—on the contrary, their ability to drive principled implementation and accountability is needed. But for the most complex, paradigm-crossing challenges, E8 capacity is also needed for facilitation and integration.

Authenticity in sustainability communication

Many sustainability organizations struggle with the tension between communicating clear values (which attracts and mobilizes) and avoiding appearing dogmatic or exclusive. This tension often reflects the difference between E6 and E8 Inner Compass.

E6 communication: "We know what is right. These are the correct principles. If you share these values, welcome. If not, you need to develop."

E8 communication: "We act from these deeply held values. We hold them as partial perspectives, not absolute truths. We welcome dialogue with other perspectives. Together we can find ways forward we couldn't see individually."

The latter communication is harder to do without appearing vague or compromising, but it creates space for genuine diversity while maintaining value orientation.

Inner Compass, together with Connectedness, perhaps most clearly shows the difference between horizontal and vertical development. One can teach someone to articulate values, to use ethical decision frameworks, to hold themselves accountable—but one cannot directly train the qualitative change in moral authority that occurs when the center of moral authority shifts from external to internal to universal, from sociocentric to world-centric, from absolutist to integrated.

This is vertical development in its essence: not becoming "better" at having an inner compass, but the very structure of what an inner compass is and how it functions transforms fundamentally.

PART III: PATTERNS AND PRINCIPLES

7. THREE CATEGORIES OF IDG QUALITIES

The need for a typology

Having examined several IDG qualities in depth—Self-Awareness, Complexity Awareness, Perspective Skills, Connectedness, and Inner Compass—a clear pattern emerges: these qualities relate to vertical development in fundamentally different ways. Some can be trained horizontally within a given developmental stage, others emerge only through stage transformation, and still others involve both trainable components and developmental depth.

This matters immensely for practitioners designing developmental interventions. Treating all 25 IDG qualities as equivalent "skills to be trained" leads to predictable disappointments: training programs that work well for some capacities fail utterly for others, not because of poor pedagogy but because of misunderstanding the nature of what is being developed.

The IDG framework itself acknowledges this tension. Thomas Jordan, the primary author of the first IDG report, noted in his theoretical systematization that "some of the items we came up with can be thought of as skills: abilities that can be learned and trained. Other items do not fit into the conception of skills, but are better understood as personality traits or virtues (some of which can be nurtured and refined), or values and qualities that are functions of a person's level of ego development."

However, the final IDG framework, designed for "mass communication" and "pedagogical accessibility," softened this distinction. All 25 capacities are presented together under the umbrella term "skills and qualities," with limited guidance about which can be trained directly and which emerge from developmental transformation. This essay seeks to make that distinction explicit.

We propose organizing the 25 IDG qualities into three categories⁵ based on their relationship to vertical development:

1. **Skills with developmental prerequisites** – Can be trained at a given stage but have ceilings determined by developmental structure
2. **Emergent qualities** – Cannot be trained directly; emerge from stage transformation
3. **Hybrid qualities** – Have trainable components but whose depth depends on developmental stage

This typology is not absolute—the boundaries between categories are permeable, and some qualities could reasonably be placed in more than one category. But it provides a useful framework for thinking about developmental strategy.

⁵ This was Claude's idea. I, Thomas Jordan, am not sure that this captures the differences in nature among the 25 IDGs. Some of them are more like personality traits, relatively independent of developmental dynamics (but may express differently at different ego stages). Consider Courage, Perseverance, Creativity, Optimism, for example.

Category 1: Skills with developmental prerequisites

These are genuine skills in the traditional sense—abilities that can be learned through instruction, practice, and feedback. However, their expression is constrained by the individual's developmental stage. You can train someone in these skills at their current stage, but there is a ceiling to what is possible that can only be transcended through vertical development.

Communication skills

The IDG framework defines communication skills as "ability to really listen to others, to foster genuine dialogue, to advocate own views skillfully, to manage conflicts constructively and to adapt communication to diverse groups."

These are clearly trainable—countless workshops teach active listening, assertive communication, conflict resolution techniques, and audience adaptation. Someone at E5 can learn and apply communication techniques more effectively than someone with no training.

But the quality of communication changes fundamentally across stages:

E4-E5 communication: Can learn to use "I statements," practice active listening techniques, follow conflict resolution protocols. Communication focused on clarity, avoiding misunderstanding, maintaining harmony. Dialogue is still fundamentally exchange of information and perspectives within shared framework.

E6 communication: Can advocate skillfully for positions, build principled arguments, analyze communication patterns for effectiveness. Strong capacity for persuasive communication and systematic conflict analysis. But dialogue often becomes sophisticated debate—seeking to convince rather than to be changed.

E7-E8 communication: Can genuinely listen not just to words but to paradigms, hold space for incommensurable perspectives, facilitate dialogue that transforms rather than just exchanges. Communication becomes generative—creating new understanding that didn't exist in any of the initial positions.

An E5 person trained in communication skills will use them at E5 capacity. The same person at E7 will use the same techniques in qualitatively different ways—not because they learned new techniques but because the meaning-making structure that interprets "what communication is for" has transformed.

Training implication: Communication skills training is valuable at any stage but should be calibrated to developmental readiness. Teaching E7-level dialogue skills to E5 participants creates confusion; they lack the structural capacity to understand what is being asked. Better: teach stage-appropriate communication, then use communication challenges as edge for vertical development.

Critical thinking

The IDG framework describes critical thinking as "skills in critically reviewing the validity of views, evidence and plans." This sounds eminently trainable—and indeed, critical thinking programs exist at every educational level.

But what counts as "critical" changes across stages:

E4-E5 critical thinking: Can learn to identify logical fallacies, ask probing questions, consider alternative viewpoints, evaluate evidence against criteria. Thinking becomes more analytical and less purely conventional. But criticism is still applied within accepted frameworks—the frameworks themselves are not yet subject to critique.

E6 critical thinking: Can systematically evaluate arguments, construct sophisticated analyses, apply rigorous standards of evidence. Strong capacity for principled critique. But blind to own paradigmatic assumptions—the principles by which evidence is evaluated feel objective rather than constructed.

E7-E8 critical thinking: Can critique not just arguments but the frameworks that generate arguments, examine epistemological assumptions, recognize multiple valid ways of knowing. Criticism becomes reflective—turned back on own thinking processes and paradigmatic commitments.

Research on reflective judgment (King & Kitchener) and skills of argument (Kuhn) shows these patterns clearly: people at different developmental levels can learn critical thinking skills but apply them within stage-specific epistemological frameworks.

Training implication: Critical thinking curricula should explicitly scaffold developmental progression—helping E5 learners strengthen analytical skills, supporting E6 learners to recognize paradigmatic assumptions, facilitating E7 learners to integrate multiple ways of knowing without falling into relativism.

Co-creation skills

Co-creation skills—"skills and motivation to build, develop and facilitate collaborative relationships with diverse stakeholders, characterized by psychological safety and genuine co-creation"—ranked #1 in the IDG survey, suggesting practitioners recognize their centrality for addressing complex challenges.

These are trainable: facilitation methods, stakeholder engagement protocols, collaborative design processes. But the depth of co-creation possible is limited by developmental capacity for perspective-taking and complexity awareness:

E5-E6 co-creation: Can learn collaborative protocols, facilitate structured processes, build consensus among stakeholders with shared basic frameworks. Creates psychological safety through clear structure, fair process, respectful communication. But struggles when stakeholders have genuinely incommensurable paradigms.

E7-E8 co-creation: Can facilitate across paradigm boundaries, hold space for creative tension between incompatible perspectives, support emergence of solutions that integrate rather than compromise differences. Creates psychological safety through genuine appreciation of difference rather than just tolerance of it.

The skills are similar—structured dialogue, stakeholder mapping, collaborative synthesis—but the capacity to work with genuine diversity (not just demographic diversity but epistemological diversity) requires post-conventional development.

Training implication: Co-creation training at E5-E6 focuses on process skills and communication techniques. Co-creation training at E7-E8 focuses on paradigm awareness, holding ambiguity, and facilitating transformative rather than just transactive collaboration.

Mobilization skills

Mobilization skills—"skills in inspiring and mobilizing others to engage in shared purposes"—also depend heavily on developmental structure, particularly on what counts as "shared purpose."

E5 mobilization: Can inspire through appealing to group identity and shared values, communicate clearly about concrete goals and next steps, build team cohesion through creating sense of belonging. Effective within relatively homogeneous groups.

E6 mobilization: Can articulate compelling vision, build principled commitment, inspire through moral clarity and personal integrity. Can mobilize across some differences through appeal to universal principles. But may alienate those who don't share the underlying paradigm.

E7-E8 mobilization: Can inspire without requiring agreement on fundamental worldviews, articulate purposes at level of abstraction that multiple paradigms can connect with differently, build diverse coalitions through genuine respect for difference rather than just strategic inclusion.

Training implication: Mobilization training should help participants understand their own sources of inspiration and how these connect to developmental stage, then develop mobilization strategies appropriate to their capacity and context.

Category 2: Emergent qualities

These qualities cannot be trained directly because they are not skills but emergent properties of developmental structure. They are effects, not causes—they arise naturally from stage transformation but cannot be installed through horizontal learning.

This doesn't mean practices are irrelevant. Contemplative practices, developmental relationships, challenging experiences can create conditions that support stage transformation, and with it the emergence of these qualities. But the relationship is indirect: practices support development, development enables emergence of qualities.

Connectedness

As explored in Section 5, Connectedness—"having a keen sense of being connected with and/or being a part of a larger whole"—is perhaps the clearest example of an emergent quality. Jordan explicitly placed it under "Identifications" rather than skills, noting that "Connectedness is certainly not a specific skill resulting from training."

You cannot train someone to experience the biosphere's well-being as intrinsic to their own well-being—this arises from identity expansion that occurs through developmental transformation. Nature immersion programs, systems thinking education, empathy practices can support this transformation, but they don't directly install Connectedness.

What can be trained: intellectual understanding of interconnection, practices that create temporary experiences of connection, commitments to act as if connected. What emerges developmentally: stable, integrated sense of self as embedded in and inseparable from larger wholes.

Inner Compass

As examined in Section 6, Inner Compass—"having a deeply felt sense of responsibility and commitment to values and purposes relating to the good of the whole"—emerges from transformation in the locus of moral authority.

You cannot train someone to have genuinely internalized, world-centric, integrated values—these develop through stage progression. What can be trained: clarifying existing values, acting consistently with them, holding oneself accountable. What emerges developmentally: the shift from external to internal to universal moral authority.

The IDG report explicitly states: "Having an 'inner compass' is not a skill, but is rather a consequence of having a broad scope of awareness that also has led to a motivation to care for and contribute to the welfare of something much larger than oneself."

Humility

The IDG definition—"being able to act in accordance with the needs of the situation without concern for one's own importance"—points to freedom from ego-defensiveness that emerges at post-conventional stages.

The report notes: "The stance of humility is here understood to be a consequence of not being (overly) identified with a certain self-image and a need to be confirmed in that self-image by others." This is clearly developmental—the robustness of self-structure that allows one to act without concern for one's own importance develops through stages.

You cannot train humility directly. Teaching someone to act humble often creates strategic self-effacement—still ego-driven, just with different tactics. Genuine humility emerges when the ego structure becomes robust enough that it no longer needs constant defense and validation.

What can be trained: recognizing own limitations, soliciting feedback, deferring to expertise, checking assumptions. What emerges developmentally: the capacity to act without ego-preoccupation because there's less ego to preoccupy.

Openness and Learning Mindset

"Having a basic mindset of curiosity and willingness to be vulnerable, embrace change and grow" sounds trainable—and indeed, growth mindset interventions proliferate. But genuine openness depends on self-structure robustness.

The IDG report notes: "Openness and Learning mindset is therefore not to be regarded solely as a skill that can be trained, but is intimately linked to adult development processes involving the whole self."

At earlier stages, when identity is more fragile and worldviews provide crucial stability, genuine openness to transformation feels threatening. One can learn to espouse openness, but lived

openness—actually being changed by encounters with difference rather than assimilating difference into existing frameworks—requires developmental capacity.

What can be trained: seeking diverse perspectives, trying new approaches, reflecting on experiences. What emerges developmentally: the self-structure robustness that allows genuine vulnerability without dissolution, real change without destabilization.

Category 3: Hybrid qualities

These qualities have both trainable components and developmental depth. Practices and training genuinely help, but what the practices produce depends on developmental structure. The same practice—meditation, perspective-taking exercises, value clarification—will have different effects at different stages.

This category is perhaps the most important for practitioners to understand: these are qualities where training is valuable and necessary but insufficient. Stage-appropriate practices combined with developmental support create synergy.

Self-Awareness

As explored in Section 2, Self-Awareness has both trainable and emergent dimensions.

Trainable: Mindfulness techniques, reflective practices, journaling, body awareness exercises, emotional labeling, psychological assessment tools.

Developmental: What one is capable of being aware of, how that awareness is structured, what can be taken as object vs. remains subject.

A mindfulness practice at E5 produces different quality of awareness than the same practice at E8—not because the technique differs but because the meaning-making structure that interprets experience differs.

Training approach: Teach stage-appropriate awareness practices (basic emotional awareness at E5, pattern recognition at E6, observing meaning-making at E7, witnessing awareness at E8). Use awareness practices as support for vertical development by helping people notice the limits of current awareness.

Presence

Presence—"ability to be in the here and now, without judgement and in a state of open-ended presence"—similarly involves both trainable techniques and developmental capacity.

Trainable: Meditation, body-based practices, attention training, techniques for managing distraction and reactivity.

Developmental: The capacity for non-defensive presence depends on self-structure robustness. At earlier stages, being fully present without judgment threatens ego stability—judgment serves protective functions that can't simply be willed away.

The IDG report notes: "This quality can partly be regarded as a skill that can be trained by practicing mindfulness exercises. But arguably a well-developed capacity for presence is also dependent on being relatively free from preoccupation with projecting and defending a particular self-image."

Training approach: Teach presence practices while recognizing that depth of presence correlates with developmental stage. Use presence practice as edge—noticing what prevents presence reveals ego structure and creates opportunity for development.

Empathy and Compassion

"Ability to relate to others, oneself and nature with kindness, empathy and compassion and the intention to address related suffering" involves multiple forms that develop sequentially.

Trainable components:

- Perspective-taking techniques
- Empathic listening skills
- Compassion practices (loving-kindness meditation)
- Skills for regulating empathic distress

Developmental dimensions:

- E4-E5: Emotional contagion and in-group empathy
- E6: Principled compassion—caring because it's right
- E7-E8: Universal compassion—caring because boundaries between self and other have dissolved

Different forms of empathy—cognitive, emotional, compassionate—become available at different stages. Training can strengthen capacities within current stage but cannot create capacities that require developmental structures not yet present.

Training approach: Build empathy skills appropriate to stage (emotional recognition at E5, perspective analysis at E6, holding suffering without fixing at E7-E8). Use empathy practices as developmental edge—noticing limits of current empathy reveals identity boundaries ripe for expansion.

Integrity and Authenticity

"A commitment and ability to act with sincerity, honesty and integrity" sounds straightforward but transforms fundamentally across stages—what counts as authentic differs.

Trainable: Values clarification, consistency monitoring, ethical decision frameworks, feedback processes, vulnerability skills.

Developmental: What one is capable of being authentic to changes. E5 can be authentic to group-derived identity. E6 can be authentic to self-chosen principles. E7-E8 can be authentic to evolving, contextual self not rigidly defined.

The IDG report notes this is "partly about values one has identified with and is committed to practicing, but it is also strongly related to personal maturity." The maturity dimension is developmental.

Training approach: Support people in clarifying and acting consistently with values at their current stage while recognizing these values themselves will evolve. Use integrity challenges (when authenticity seems to conflict with other values) as developmental edge.

Complexity Awareness

As explored in Section 3, Complexity Awareness has both skill and structural dimensions.

Trainable: Systems thinking tools, causal loop diagramming, identifying feedback loops, analyzing leverage points, mental model exploration.

Developmental: The complexity that can be held depends on cognitive capacity at each stage. E5 can list factors. E6 can analyze systems. E7-E8 can hold multiple incommensurable frameworks simultaneously and work productively with irreducible complexity.

Training approach: Teach systems thinking tools appropriate to developmental readiness. E5-E6: systemic mapping and analysis. E6-E7: examining observer effect and paradigm dependence. E7-E8: working fluidly across multiple frameworks.

Perspective Skills

As examined in Section 4, Perspective Skills—"skills in seeking, understanding and actively making use of insights from contrasting perspectives"—involve both techniques and developmental capacity.

Trainable: Perspective-taking protocols, stakeholder analysis methods, active listening techniques, frameworks for understanding worldview differences.

Developmental: The depth of perspective-taking possible—from role-based (E5) to principled analysis (E6) to genuine inhabiting of incommensurable worldviews (E7-E8)—depends on developmental stage.

Training approach: Teach perspective-taking methods calibrated to stage. Use encounters with genuinely different perspectives as developmental edge—when perspective-taking techniques fail, it reveals the limits of current stage and creates opening for development.

Implications: Toward developmental roadmaps

This typology suggests a fundamental reorientation of how we approach IDG development:

Rather than treating all 25 IDGs as equivalent training targets, we can create developmental roadmaps that:

1. **Assess developmental readiness** – Where is the individual or collective currently centered? What is their stage of center of gravity?

2. **Build stage-appropriate skills** – For Category 1 qualities (skills with prerequisites), provide training calibrated to current stage. This creates competency within current capacity.
3. **Create conditions for emergence** – For Category 2 qualities (emergent), recognize they cannot be trained directly. Provide practices, experiences, and relationships that support vertical development from which these qualities naturally emerge.
4. **Integrate skills and structure** – For Category 3 qualities (hybrids), combine stage-appropriate skills training with developmental support. Use skill practice as edge for vertical development.
5. **Sequence horizontally and vertically** – Alternate between horizontal skill-building (expanding capacity at current stage) and vertical development (transforming to new stage). Both are necessary; neither alone is sufficient.
6. **Recognize developmental diversity** – In groups, some participants will be ready for skills training, others for developmental edge-work. Differentiate rather than assuming one-size-fits-all.
7. **Accept developmental timeframes** – Horizontal learning can happen in hours or weeks. Vertical development unfolds over months and years. Set realistic expectations.

For organizational development:

Organizations often invest heavily in training Category 1 and 3 qualities while completely ignoring the developmental dimension. A systems thinking workshop (Category 3) for an E5-centered organization may create frustration rather than insight—participants lack the cognitive structure to make sense of what's being taught.

Better: Assess organizational center of gravity, provide stage-appropriate training in Category 1 skills, create developmental conditions (challenging experiences, diverse perspectives, reflective practices) that support vertical growth, and recognize that some capacities (Category 2) will only emerge as the collective develops.

For the IDG initiative:

A potential IDG 3.0 framework might explicitly acknowledge the developmental dimension by:

- Marking which qualities are primarily skills (Category 1), emergent (Category 2), or hybrid (Category 3)
- Providing stage-specific guidance for developing each quality
- Creating assessment tools that measure both horizontal competency and vertical stage
- Designing interventions that integrate horizontal and vertical development
- Setting appropriate timelines—quick wins for skill training, patient investment for developmental transformation

This wouldn't diminish the accessibility or utility of the IDG framework—it would enhance it by helping practitioners understand why some interventions work brilliantly while others fail mysteriously, and by providing more realistic and effective developmental strategies.

The three-category typology reveals that the IDG framework actually encompasses fundamentally different kinds of human capacities—skills that can be trained, structures that must

develop, and hybrids requiring both. Understanding these differences transforms how we approach inner development work, shifting from naive hope that all 25 qualities can simply be taught to more sophisticated developmental strategy that sequences horizontal skill-building with vertical transformation.

8. WHY VERTICAL DEVELOPMENT MATTERS FOR SUSTAINABILITY WORK

The fundamental mismatch

The field of sustainability faces a structural paradox that rarely gets explicitly named: the consciousness required to effectively address our most pressing global challenges fundamentally mismatches the consciousness that currently dominates most organizational and societal structures.

Put simply: most sustainability problems require E7-E8 consciousness to navigate effectively, yet most organizational and societal structures operate from an E5-E6 center of gravity. This creates a persistent implementation gap that confounds practitioners: we know what needs to happen (the SDGs articulate it clearly), we have the technical knowledge and resources, we have growing commitment from leadership—yet transformative change remains frustratingly elusive.

Understanding this through a developmental lens reveals why. The challenges we face—climate change, biodiversity loss, systemic inequality, resource depletion—are not merely complicated technical problems requiring better analysis and implementation. They are complex adaptive challenges requiring fundamental transformation in how we think, relate, and organize. They demand capacities that only become structurally available at post-conventional developmental stages.

Yet the vast majority of efforts to address these challenges are designed and implemented by systems operating from conventional consciousness:

- **Organizations centered at E5-E6** design sustainability strategies using mechanistic thinking, seek consensus around universal principles, implement through hierarchical control, and measure success through predefined metrics
- **Multi-stakeholder initiatives** struggle because participants at E6 seek agreement on foundational principles—impossible when genuine paradigmatic diversity exists
- **Systems change efforts** use sophisticated tools but miss that the system includes the consciousness of those trying to change it
- **Values-based movements** inspire commitment but often become rigid or exclusive when driven by E6 certainty rather than E8 integration

This is not to dismiss the enormous value of current sustainability work. E5-E6 consciousness enables crucial capacities: principled commitment, systematic implementation, rigorous accountability, long-term planning. Much essential work happens at these stages. But for the most complex, paradigm-crossing, transformative aspects of sustainability—the work that truly deserves the word "transformation"—something more is required.

Four persistent challenges illuminated

Examining specific persistent challenges in sustainability work through a developmental lens reveals patterns that are otherwise mystifying. These are not challenges that can be solved through better strategy or increased resources—they are structural limitations that can only be transcended through developmental transformation.

Challenge 1: The collaboration ceiling

Multi-stakeholder collaboration has become the holy grail of sustainability work. The logic is impeccable: complex problems require diverse perspectives; no single actor has complete knowledge or sufficient power; genuine solutions must integrate multiple viewpoints and interests. The SDGs themselves presuppose such collaboration (SDG 17: "Partnerships for the Goals").

Yet multi-stakeholder initiatives persistently struggle. Convening diverse actors is relatively straightforward; creating the conditions for transformative rather than merely transactional collaboration proves extraordinarily difficult. Meetings become positional, stakeholders retreat to defended interests, initiatives produce compromise documents that satisfy no one, momentum dissipates.

The developmental analysis:

The form of collaboration possible depends on participants' developmental capacity:

E5-E6 collaboration seeks consensus around shared principles and values. This works beautifully when stakeholders already share fundamental worldviews—enabling coordination, efficient implementation, strong commitment. But when genuine paradigmatic diversity exists—indigenous knowledge systems meeting Western scientific epistemology, growth-oriented economic paradigms encountering degrowth perspectives, techno-optimist and deep ecology worldviews—E6 participants experience this as irreconcilable conflict requiring resolution through debate and persuasion.

The underlying assumption is that one framework must prevail: either we agree on foundational principles or we cannot genuinely collaborate. E6 participants become skilled at building arguments for their position, analyzing others' logical inconsistencies, articulating principles with increasing sophistication. But the more sophisticated the argumentation becomes, the more entrenched the positions.

E7-E8 collaboration can work productively with paradigmatic incommensurability. Rather than requiring agreement on foundations, E7-E8 participants can:

- Recognize and articulate their own paradigmatic commitments as partial perspectives rather than universal truths
- Genuinely appreciate alternative frameworks without needing to agree with or assimilate them
- Hold creative tension between incompatible worldviews without collapsing into relativism
- Facilitate dialogue that generates new possibilities not contained in any original position
- Build working relationships across differences without requiring conversion

This doesn't mean E7-E8 participants are more skilled at consensus-building—they may actually be less interested in consensus. Rather, they can work with dissensus productively, creating what might be called "collaborative differentiation" rather than traditional consensus.

The practical implication:

Transformative multi-stakeholder collaboration requires a critical mass of participants at E7-E8 (not all participants, but enough to hold the space and facilitate the process). Without this, initiatives default to either:

- Superficial consensus that papers over real differences (common in E5-dominated groups)
- Sophisticated debate that entrenches positions (common in E6-dominated groups)
- Paralyzed relativism unable to move to action (common in E7 without E8 integration)

This explains why some multi-stakeholder initiatives genuinely transform how participants understand the issue, generating innovative hybrid solutions, while others—with apparently similar design, resources, and good intentions—produce only frustration. The difference often lies not in the facilitation methodology or the quality of analysis, but in the developmental composition of participants.

What this means for practice:

1. Assess developmental readiness before designing multi-stakeholder processes
2. Don't force E6-dominant groups into processes requiring E7-E8 capacity—design stage-appropriate collaboration
3. Invest in developing post-conventional capacity in key facilitators and boundary-spanning leaders
4. Accept that some forms of transformative collaboration take time to become possible—measured in years of developmental work, not weeks of negotiation
5. Consider that sometimes, transformation requires new actors with different developmental capacity rather than trying to transform existing stakeholders

Challenge 2: The systems thinking paradox

Systems thinking has become ubiquitous in sustainability discourse. We map causal loops, identify leverage points, analyze feedback mechanisms, explore emergence and nonlinearity. Tools like systems dynamics modeling, causal loop diagramming, and systems mapping populate sustainability curricula and organizational strategy sessions.

Yet a persistent gap exists between systems understanding and systems transformation. Organizations invest heavily in systems thinking training, produce sophisticated systemic analyses of their sustainability challenges, then implement solutions that are fundamentally non-systemic: linear interventions, mechanistic controls, reductionist metrics. The map remains on the wall while behavior reverts to familiar patterns.

The developmental analysis:

Systems thinking itself has developmental depth that is rarely acknowledged:

E6 systems thinking treats systems as complex mechanisms to be understood and optimized. It can analyze feedback loops, identify leverage points, map system dynamics with considerable sophistication. But the system is still "out there"—an objective reality to be correctly modeled and controlled. The observer stands outside the system, analyzing it.

This produces mechanical systems thinking: rigorous analysis, sophisticated models, clear intervention strategies. It enables important work: identifying unintended consequences, anticipating ripple effects, finding high-leverage interventions. But it misses something fundamental.

E7-E8 systems thinking recognizes that the observer is part of the system being observed, that system boundaries are interpretive choices, that multiple valid system descriptions exist depending on one's paradigm, that systems have qualities that cannot be captured in mechanistic models. This produces what might be called "living systems wisdom"—a way of engaging with complex systems that includes but transcends analytical understanding.

The gap between mechanical systems analysis (E6) and living systems wisdom (E7-E8) explains many puzzling failures:

- Organizations produce brilliant systemic analyses then implement through mechanistic command-and-control
- Systems maps identify cultural and paradigmatic elements as crucial variables but interventions target only measurable behaviors
- Leverage point analyses identify "changing mindsets" as highest leverage but no one knows how to actually do that
- Understanding systems doesn't translate to transforming them because transformation requires participating in the system as conscious agent, not just analyzing it as external observer

The practical implication:

Systems thinking tools are valuable and should be taught widely. But we should recognize they work differently at different developmental stages:

- E5-E6: Use tools to see complexity, map relationships, avoid obvious pitfalls—valuable but limited
- E6-E7: Begin to see how own paradigm shapes what gets included in systems map—crucial transition
- E7-E8: Hold multiple systemic perspectives simultaneously, engage with irreducible uncertainty, act as conscious participant in systemic change

Most systems thinking education stops at E6—teaching the tools but not the developmental capacity required to use them transformatively. Better: teach stage-appropriate systems thinking while using systems inquiry itself as edge for vertical development. When the systems thinking tools bump against their limits (which they inevitably do), that becomes the invitation to developmental growth.

Challenge 3: The values impasse

Values-based leadership and culture have become central to sustainability strategy. Organizations articulate sustainability values, embed them in mission statements, train employees in values alignment, hold leadership accountable to values. The logic would be: behavior flows from values, sustainable behavior requires sustainable values.

Yet this often creates as many problems as it solves:

- E6 leaders create strongly values-based organizations that inspire deep commitment from those who share the values—but feel exclusive, dogmatic, or colonizing to those who don't
- E5 employees experience organizational values as imposed from above, performing compliance while the values remain external
- Diversity of perspective diminishes as value conformity becomes implicit hiring criterion
- The organization becomes rigid, unable to adapt when contexts shift or new perspectives emerge
- Cross-cultural partnerships struggle when different value systems meet

The developmental analysis:

The problem isn't having values—it's how values function at different developmental stages:

E5-E6 values orientation experiences values as objectively valid principles that everyone should recognize and adopt. Organizations at this stage are often deeply sincere in their commitment—leadership genuinely believes these values are right and important. But this sincerity comes with rigidity: the values feel non-negotiable, deviation feels like moral failure, and those with different values must either convert or leave.

This creates what might be called "principled exclusion"—not from malice but from the structure of E6 consciousness that has difficulty holding that multiple incommensurable value systems can be equally valid. The sustainability values feel universal and obvious rather than as one particular cultural expression of care and commitment.

E7-E8 values orientation can hold deep commitment to values while recognizing them as partial, culturally constructed perspectives. This sounds paradoxical to E6 consciousness: how can you be committed to values you see as constructed and partial? But that's precisely the E8 capacity—integrated integrity rather than principled certainty.

E7-E8 leaders can:

- Articulate the organization's values clearly and act consistently from them
- Hold these values as "our values, not universal truth"
- Create space for genuine value diversity without descending into relativism
- Engage productively with partners who have fundamentally different value systems
- Adapt values as understanding deepens without experiencing this as loss of integrity

The practical implication:

Organizations need values—shared purpose and commitment matter enormously for effective sustainability work. But values-based culture works very differently depending on developmental stage:

E5-E6 values culture:

- Clear, explicit values consistently modeled by leadership
- Strong socialization into organizational values
- Works best for relatively homogeneous organizations with shared basic worldviews

- Limits: difficulty with genuine diversity, rigidity, can feel exclusive or dogmatic

E7-E8 values culture:

- Clear values held lightly—deeply committed yet openly evolving
- Space for value diversity within broad alignment on purpose
- Cross-paradigm partnerships possible without requiring value agreement
- Limits: can feel unclear or insufficiently committed to E5-E6 members, requires high developmental capacity in leadership

Most organizations need both: strong E6 capacity for clear values implementation and E8 capacity for navigating value diversity and paradigmatic complexity. The challenge is that E6 tends to dominate organizational culture, and the more values-driven the organization, the more strongly E6 gets reinforced—creating the ironic situation where deeply committed sustainability organizations struggle most with the very flexibility and paradigm-crossing capacity that transformative sustainability requires.

Challenge 4: The measurement trap

"What gets measured gets managed" has become organizational dogma. Sustainability work increasingly emphasizes measurement: ESG metrics, SDG indicators, impact assessment, sustainability scorecards. Funders and boards demand metrics, certification schemes proliferate, entire industries emerge around sustainability measurement.

This drive for measurement produces genuine value: accountability, transparency, comparability, progress tracking. Yet it also creates a pernicious trap that threatens to undermine the developmental work most crucial for transformative sustainability.

The developmental analysis:

The measurement imperative reflects E6 consciousness—the belief that reality can and should be objectively quantified, that rigor equals measurability, that what matters can be made visible through the right metrics. This is not wrong—it enables important capacities. But it becomes problematic when applied uniformly to all forms of development.

Some IDG qualities lend themselves to measurement:

- Communication skills: can be observed, assessed, rated
- Critical thinking: demonstrated through performance on structured tasks
- Co-creation skills: evaluated through stakeholder feedback and outcomes

Other qualities resist meaningful quantification:

- Connectedness: how do you measure genuine identity expansion vs. intellectual belief or temporary state?
- Inner Compass: how do you distinguish genuine internalized, world-centric values from sophisticated performance of such values?
- Humility: the moment you measure it and people know they're being measured, you've likely destroyed what you're trying to measure

The measurement trap creates several dynamics that undermine developmental work:

Gaming metrics: When qualities that are actually emergent properties of developmental transformation (Category 2 in Section 7's typology) get measured as if they were trainable skills, organizations optimize for measurable indicators rather than genuine development. People learn to perform "connectedness" or display "inner compass" in ways that register on assessments without undergoing the structural transformation these qualities actually represent.

Privileging the measurable: Limited organizational attention and resources flow toward what can be measured and reported. Category 1 skills (which are measurable) get resourced while Category 2 developmental work (which is not) gets marginalized—despite the latter often being more crucial for transformative capacity.

Accelerating timelines: Measurement creates pressure for quick results—we need to report progress next quarter. But genuine developmental transformation unfolds over months and years. The pressure to show measurable results in measurable timeframes pushes organizations toward horizontal skill training (which is faster and more measurable) and away from vertical development (which is slower and harder to quantify).

Reifying developmental stages: When we create assessment tools that measure developmental stage, we risk treating stages as achievement levels to be accumulated like merit badges rather than as structural transformations in meaning-making. People game the assessments, organizations select for those who test at higher stages, the whole enterprise becomes distorted.

The practical implication:

We need discernment about what to measure and what to support through non-measured means:

Measure when useful:

- Horizontal skill development (Category 1) where measurement provides useful feedback
- Observable behaviors and outcomes that indicate effectiveness
- Progress on concrete sustainability targets and commitments

Don't measure, or measure very carefully:

- Emergent qualities (Category 2) that are effects of development, not skills
- Developmental stage itself—creates too many perverse incentives
- Inner qualities whose genuine presence is destroyed by measurement

Instead, for developmental transformation:

- Create conditions and practices known to support development
- Trust the process over time rather than demanding quarterly metrics
- Assess impact through long-term outcomes and qualitative indicators
- Focus on creating developmental culture rather than measuring developmental achievement

The measurement trap reveals a deeper issue: E6 consciousness struggles to value what it cannot measure, control, and optimize. Recognizing the limits of measurement—holding that some of the most important work cannot and should not be quantified—itself requires post-conventional developmental capacity. This is perhaps the most challenging implication: the very consciousness required to design appropriate sustainability development systems is the consciousness we're trying to develop.

The way forward

These four challenges—collaboration ceiling, systems thinking paradox, values impasse, and measurement trap—are not separate problems requiring separate solutions. They are different manifestations of the same fundamental issue: the mismatch between the consciousness required for transformative sustainability work and the consciousness that currently dominates most organizational and societal structures.

Understanding this developmental dimension doesn't make the work easier—if anything, it reveals that the work is even more challenging than we thought. But it does make it clearer. We can stop being mystified by persistent failures and start designing interventions appropriate to the actual developmental terrain.

This means:

Accepting longer timeframes: Transformative sustainability work that requires post-conventional consciousness cannot be achieved in three-year grant cycles or five-year strategic plans. We need patience for developmental transformation measured in decades.

Investing in vertical development: Rather than only funding technical solutions, policy development, and skill training, we need investment in the developmental journeys of leaders, practitioners, and systems as wholes.

Building developmentally diverse teams: Rather than seeking ideological alignment, we need teams that span developmental stages—E6 for principled implementation, E7 for paradigm awareness, E8 for integration and facilitation across difference.

Creating developmental culture: Organizations need to become contexts that support stage transformation, not just skill accumulation—through challenging experiences, developmental relationships, reflective practices, and crucially, permission to not-know.

Recognizing the bootstrapping problem: We need E7-E8 consciousness to design systems that develop E7-E8 consciousness. This can feel paradoxical, but it's the nature of developmental work. We work at the edge of our own understanding, using the consciousness we have to create conditions for consciousness we don't yet fully possess.

The developmental lens doesn't offer simple solutions—it reveals that transformative sustainability is a genuinely long-term, multi-generational project of human development. But it also offers hope: if the core challenge is consciousness, then consciousness can develop. The question is whether we have the wisdom to invest in that development and the patience to support transformation on its own timeline.

PART IV: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

9. STAGE-APPROPRIATE DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT

Translating theory into practice

The previous sections have established that the IDG qualities manifest differently across developmental stages and that effective sustainability work requires post-conventional consciousness. But understanding developmental theory is not the same as knowing how to support development in practice. This section provides concrete guidance for coaches, consultants, and organizational developers working with inner development.

The approach outlined here rests on three core principles that emerge directly from developmental theory and decades of research on adult development:

1. **Meet people where they are** – Development cannot be forced or accelerated beyond what the current structure can integrate
2. **Support stage-appropriate challenges** – Growth happens at the edge of current capacity, not far beyond it
3. **Distinguish skills from structure** – Know when to train skills, when to support structural transformation, and when to create holding environment for emergence

These principles may seem obvious, yet they are violated constantly in well-intentioned developmental work. Organizations design leadership programs that presuppose E7 capacities in E5 participants. Consultants offer transformative practices appropriate for E8 to groups centered at E6. Coaches push clients toward edges they're structurally unprepared to explore. The result: confusion, resistance, or superficial adoption of language without structural transformation.

Principle 1: Meet people where they are

This first principle requires genuine developmental assessment—not just of skills and competencies, but of stage of center of gravity. Where is this individual (or collective) actually centered? What is structurally possible from this stage? What remains genuinely unavailable until further development occurs?

Assessment guidelines

Developmental assessment is subtle work requiring careful attention:

Observe meaning-making patterns, not just behaviors. Two people can exhibit similar behaviors (e.g., seeking feedback, expressing values, analyzing complexity) from entirely different developmental structures. The E5 person seeks feedback to align with group norms. The E6 person seeks feedback to meet self-defined standards. The E8 person seeks feedback as part of ongoing inquiry into blindspots and growth edges.

Listen for stage-specific language indicators:

- E4-E5: References to group norms, what "we" do, concern for fitting in, conventional categories

- E6: Emphasis on principles, personal standards, long-term goals, achievement, self-improvement
- E7: Awareness of multiple perspectives, questioning assumptions, concern with authenticity vs. social role, tolerance for ambiguity
- E8: Integration of contradictions, both/and thinking, awareness of paradigms, committed action within acknowledged uncertainty

Look for how complexity is handled:

- E5: Lists multiple factors but doesn't integrate them systemically
- E6: Systematic analysis using clear frameworks but framework itself not questioned
- E7: Awareness of framework-dependence but may get paralyzed by multiple perspectives
- E8: Fluid use of multiple frameworks as tools without being limited by any

Notice what creates defensiveness:

- E5: Challenge to group norms or belonging
- E6: Challenge to principles or competence
- E7: Pressure to commit to single perspective
- E8: (Less defensive overall, but may resist what feels like rigidity or simplification)

Use formal assessments judiciously. Tools like the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT) or Leadership Development Profile provide valuable data but should not replace careful observation and dialogue. Formal assessment works best to confirm intuitions, reveal blindspots, and provide language for conversations about development.

Honoring developmental validity

Each stage represents a coherent way of making meaning that is appropriate for certain contexts and life phases. Meeting people where they are means recognizing the validity and functionality of their current stage rather than treating earlier stages as deficient or inferior.

E5 consciousness enables:

- Strong team cohesion and loyalty
- Reliable adherence to established procedures
- Effective functioning within clear role structures
- Rapid socialization into organizational culture
- Stability and consistency in execution

E6 consciousness enables:

- Principled leadership and moral courage
- Systematic planning and goal achievement
- Personal responsibility and accountability
- Sustained effort toward long-term objectives
- Clear standards and performance expectations

E7 consciousness enables:

- Recognition of paradigm-dependence
- Genuine tolerance of difference
- Sophisticated cultural awareness
- Capacity for deep reflection and inquiry
- Willingness to question conventional wisdom

Each stage has both capacities and limitations. Honoring where people are means appreciating what they bring while also recognizing what remains structurally unavailable. This is fundamentally different from the deficit thinking that pervades much organizational development: "You're at E5, you need to get to E8." Better: "You're centered at E5, here's how we can work effectively with that stage's capacities while creating conditions that support your natural developmental trajectory."

Stage-appropriate language and concepts

Use concepts and language accessible at the person's current stage:

For E5-centered individuals or groups:

- Emphasize team values and collective purpose
- Frame development as contributing to group success
- Use concrete examples and clear procedures
- Reference respected authorities and models
- Build on existing group strengths

For E6-centered individuals or groups:

- Emphasize personal responsibility and achievement
- Frame development in terms of standards and goals
- Provide principled frameworks and systematic approaches
- Appeal to research evidence and expert analysis
- Support self-directed learning toward clear objectives

For E7-centered individuals or groups:

- Acknowledge multiple valid perspectives
- Create space for questioning and inquiry
- Emphasize authenticity and self-authorship
- Explore assumptions and hidden dimensions
- Welcome complexity and ambiguity

For E8-centered individuals or groups:

- Engage with paradigmatic diversity
- Balance multiple frameworks simultaneously
- Support integration rather than resolution of tensions
- Focus on appropriate action within uncertainty
- Co-create emergent understanding

The same developmental work can be described in stage-appropriate ways. Perspective-taking practice might be introduced to E5 as "understanding your teammates better," to E6 as "developing leadership competency in stakeholder management," to E7 as "exploring how different worldviews construct reality," and to E8 as "expanding capacity for holding incommensurable frameworks simultaneously."

Principle 2: Support stage-appropriate challenges

Development happens through encountering challenges that the current meaning-making structure cannot fully assimilate—experiences that create what Kegan calls "optimal mismatch." But the challenge must be at the edge of current capacity, not far beyond it. Too little challenge produces no growth. Too much challenge produces overwhelm, defensiveness, or superficial adoption of advanced-stage language without structural transformation.

For E5 → E6 transition: Encouraging self-authorship

The central developmental task of the E5→E6 transition is the shift from socially-constructed to self-authored identity. The person must move from "my values are what my group values" to "my values are what I, through reflection and choice, determine to value."

Developmental challenges that support this transition:

Encourage personal responsibility for choices. Rather than reinforcing "what we do here" thinking, create situations where individuals must make their own decisions and live with the consequences. This doesn't mean abandoning support or throwing people into chaos—it means scaffolding increasing degrees of autonomous decision-making.

- In leadership: Delegate meaningful authority with accountability
- In learning: Move from prescribed curricula to self-directed projects
- In values: Ask "what do you think is right?" rather than "what does the organization expect?"
- In relationships: Support differentiation from reference groups while maintaining connection

Build capacity for self-reflection and internal standards. E5 looks outward for validation. E6 develops robust internal criteria. Support this through:

- Regular reflection practices (journaling, reviews, self-assessment)
- Explicit work on clarifying personal values and principles
- Setting self-defined goals beyond what others expect
- Developing capacity for meaningful self-criticism

Develop skills in setting and achieving self-defined goals. E6 is characterized by long-term, self-formulated goals and systematic work toward them. Build this capacity:

- Practice breaking large goals into achievable steps
- Build skills in self-monitoring and course-correction
- Celebrate achievement while focusing on learning
- Develop capacity to persist when external validation is absent

Support differentiation from group norms while maintaining connection. This is perhaps the most crucial and delicate aspect. E5 needs group belonging; moving to E6 requires being able to hold one's own perspective even when it differs from the group, without losing connection.

- Create explicit permission for differing views
- Model holding one's own perspective respectfully
- Distinguish between disagreeing and disrespecting
- Build skills in principled advocacy
- Maintain connection through disagreement

IDG focus for E5→E6 transition:

- Self-awareness: developing internal observer
- Critical thinking: building analytical skills
- Long-term orientation: expanding time horizon
- Integrity and Authenticity: clarifying values
- Perseverance: sustaining effort toward self-chosen goals

What to avoid:

- Pushing E7-level relativism or paradigm-questioning (will feel destabilizing rather than liberating)
- Teaching advanced systems thinking before principled thinking is established
- Emphasizing value plurality before self-authored values are solid
- Creating excessive ambiguity without clear structures

For E6 → E7 transition: Questioning certainty

The E6→E7 transition is often tumultuous. It involves recognizing that one's carefully constructed principles and self-authored identity are themselves culturally constructed and perspectival. This can feel like the ground falling away—"If my principles are just one cultural construction among many, what do I stand on?"

Developmental challenges that support this transition:

Create safe space to question cherished principles and assumptions. This requires psychological safety—E6 can only afford to question certainties when the relational container is secure. Without safety, questioning produces defensiveness rather than inquiry.

- Establish explicit norms that questioning is valued
- Model questioning own assumptions
- Create peer relationships where mutual inquiry is supported
- Distinguish between questioning (exploring) and criticizing (attacking)
- Acknowledge that this process is often uncomfortable

Introduce genuine encounter with incommensurable perspectives. E6 can debate with others who hold different positions within similar paradigms. E7 emerges from encountering worldviews so different that debate becomes meaningless—perspectives that cannot be reconciled through better argument.

- Facilitate dialogue with people from genuinely different cultures
- Study alternative epistemologies and ways of knowing
- Encounter indigenous wisdom traditions, contemplative traditions, non-Western philosophies
- Create immersive cross-cultural experiences
- Read critical theory, postmodern philosophy, systems thinking that reveals paradigm-dependence

Support tolerance for ambiguity and not-knowing. E6 values clarity, decisiveness, knowing what's right. E7 must learn to function without that certainty.

- Practice sitting with difficult questions without rushing to answers
- Explicitly value inquiry over certainty
- Share experiences of productive not-knowing
- Distinguish between not-knowing as deficit vs. not-knowing as wisdom
- Build capacity to act effectively amid acknowledged uncertainty

Help recognize limits of rational analysis. E6 often has deep faith that rigorous analysis leads to truth. E7 recognizes that analysis always operates within paradigms, frameworks, and assumptions that are themselves not subject to analysis.

- Explore how different analytical frameworks produce different truths
- Study the sociology of knowledge—how social location shapes knowing
- Examine own unexamined assumptions in presumably objective analyses
- Practice multiple framings of the same situation
- Recognize that observer is never outside what is observed

Facilitate examination of cultural conditioning. E6 experiences their values as self-chosen. E7 recognizes that even self-authorship happens within cultural context that shapes what seems thinkable and desirable.

- Explore cultural roots of own values
- Study how different cultures construct selfhood differently
- Recognize ways own cultural background shapes what feels "obvious"
- Encounter perspectives where Western individualism appears culturally parochial
- Develop genuine curiosity about cultural difference rather than just tolerance

IDG focus for E6→E7 transition:

- Perspective skills: genuinely inhabiting different worldviews
- Openness and Learning Mindset: vulnerability to being changed
- Humility: releasing need for certainty
- Complexity awareness: recognizing paradigm-dependence
- Sense-making: tolerance for multiple valid interpretations

What to avoid:

- Pushing E8-level integration before deconstruction is complete (E7 needs to fully experience relativism)

- Creating so much ambiguity that paralysis results—balance questioning with continued capacity to act
- Pathologizing E7's struggles with commitment and action (this is natural developmental territory)
- Moving too quickly—this transition often takes years

Special note on the E6→E7 transition:

This is often the most challenging transition for high-achieving professionals. E6 has brought success—their principled approach, systematic thinking, and strong standards have served them well. Questioning these foundations can feel like losing what makes them effective.

Some E6 individuals resist this transition, building increasingly sophisticated E6 structures rather than moving through to E7. Others experience it as crisis—particularly when life circumstances force recognition that their principles don't work as universally as assumed. Still others welcome it as liberation from rigidity they'd begun to feel constraining.

The developmental support needed is holding space for disorientation while maintaining enough structure that the person doesn't fragment. This is why safe relational containers matter so much—development requires security to explore insecurity.

For E7 → E8 transition: Integration and committed action

The E7→E8 transition involves moving from deconstruction to reconstruction, from recognizing multiplicity to achieving integration, from paralyzed relativism to committed action within acknowledged uncertainty.

Developmental challenges that support this transition:

Support movement from deconstruction to reconstruction. E7 has learned to take apart—showing how frameworks are constructed, revealing hidden assumptions, demonstrating contingency and partiality. E8 must learn to build again—not naively, but with full awareness.

- Practice articulating "my truth while acknowledging it as partial"
- Build capacity for committed action without certainty
- Develop skill in working with "both/and" rather than "either/or"
- Learn to hold strong positions lightly
- Distinguish between relativism and perspectivalism

Help develop capacity for committed action within acknowledged uncertainty. This is the core E8 competency. E7 knows everything is uncertain and partial—which can produce paralysis. E8 acts effectively despite and within that uncertainty.

- Practice making decisions with incomplete information
- Develop comfort with "good enough" rather than "perfectly right"
- Build capacity to revise commitments as understanding evolves
- Learn to distinguish contexts requiring commitment from those requiring flexibility
- Develop trust in one's capacity to navigate emergently

Cultivate dialectical thinking. E8 doesn't resolve contradictions by choosing one side or finding compromise—it holds contradictions in creative tension, allowing new possibilities to emerge.

- Practice identifying false dichotomies
- Explore how apparent opposites are actually polarities requiring both
- Study dialectical philosophy and integral theory
- Develop capacity to hold multiple truths simultaneously
- Learn to work productively with paradox

Build capacity to hold multiple frameworks simultaneously. E7 can understand multiple frameworks sequentially—looking through each in turn. E8 can hold them simultaneously, using each as tool without being captured by any.

- Practice shifting between different analytical lenses fluidly
- Learn to recognize which framework serves which purpose
- Develop meta-awareness of framework choice
- Build skill in translating across paradigms
- Create hybrid frameworks that integrate multiple perspectives

Develop practical wisdom for navigating complexity. E8 is less characterized by sophisticated analysis (though that remains available) and more by a kind of embodied wisdom—appropriate action arising from deep understanding.

- Cultivate presence and awareness practices
- Develop capacity to sense into situations rather than just analyze them
- Build trust in intuitive knowing alongside rational knowing
- Practice responding to contexts rather than following universal rules
- Learn when analysis helps and when it hinders

IDG focus for E7→E8 transition:

- Integration of all IDGs rather than mastery of specific ones
- Sense-making: creating coherence amid multiplicity
- Complexity awareness: working with irreducible complexity
- Inner Compass: integrated values orientation
- Connectedness: expanded identity boundaries
- Presence: embodied awareness

What to avoid:

- Rushing the integration—E7 needs time to fully explore relativism
- Providing too much structure (E7→E8 requires learning to navigate without fixed maps)
- Treating E8 as achievement to be attained rather than territory to grow into
- Using E8 language without structural capacity (common pitfall—spiritual bypassing)

Special note on the E7→E8 transition:

This transition often involves some form of integrative experience—not necessarily dramatic, but a shift from "seeing multiple perspectives" to "being" more fluid and integrated. This might come through:

- Intensive contemplative practice
- Significant life transitions or crises
- Deep engagement with integral or developmental theory
- Sustained developmental relationships with E8+ mentors
- Cross-paradigm work that demands integration

The transition cannot be forced but can be supported through creating conditions conducive to integration.

Principle 3: Distinguish skills from structure

As established in Section 7's typology, the 25 IDG qualities fall into three categories based on their relationship to development: skills with prerequisites (can be trained at a stage), emergent qualities (arise from stage transformation), and hybrids (both trainable and developmental). Effective developmental support requires knowing which approach to use when.

When to use horizontal development (skills training)

Clear indicators:

- Specific skill deficits within current stage capacity
- Technique-focused needs (communication protocols, facilitation methods, analytical tools)
- Can be taught through instruction, practice, and feedback
- Results visible in weeks or months

Examples:

- Teaching active listening techniques to E5-E6 participants
- Training in systems mapping tools for E6 individuals
- Facilitating dialogue protocols for E7-E8 groups
- Developing critical thinking skills appropriate to current stage

Best practices for skills training:

- Assess developmental readiness before designing curriculum
- Use stage-appropriate language and examples
- Provide clear models and structured practice
- Give specific feedback on performance
- Create opportunities for skill application in real contexts
- Measure outcomes through observable behavioral change

Limitations to recognize:

- Skills training hits ceiling determined by developmental stage
- Teaching skills requiring unavailable stage capacities produces superficial mimicry
- Horizontal development alone doesn't create transformative capacity

When to support vertical development (stage transition)**Clear indicators:**

- Person encounters repeated ceiling that thinking differently can't solve
- Current meaning-making structure proves inadequate for life/work demands
- Individual experiences patterns they can't think their way out of
- Context requires capacities beyond current stage
- Person shows readiness signals (curiosity about own assumptions, tolerance for not-knowing)

Developmental support requirements:

- Developmental relationships (coaches, mentors, peer groups)
- Safe challenge—optimal mismatch between current capacity and demand
- Integration time—space to make sense of new perspectives
- Support through disorientation—containment during transition
- Longer timeframes—months to years rather than weeks

Best practices for supporting vertical development:

- Create psychological safety for exploring edges
- Introduce stage-appropriate challenges (see Principle 2)
- Provide developmental relationships with people slightly ahead
- Allow adequate time for integration
- Expect and normalize disorientation
- Don't measure or evaluate the process (this itself hinders development)
- Trust the developmental process rather than trying to control outcomes

What this looks like in practice:

For E5→E6 transition:

- Coaching relationships that support self-authorship
- Leadership opportunities with real authority and accountability
- Reflective practices that build internal observer
- Projects requiring sustained self-direction
- Peer groups where it's safe to hold different views

For E6→E7 transition:

- Encounters with genuinely incommensurable worldviews
- Contemplative or reflective practices that reveal paradigm-dependence
- Cross-cultural immersions that challenge certainties

- Philosophical study of epistemology and paradigms
- Safe peer relationships for exploring uncertainty

For E7→E8 transition:

- Advanced contemplative practices
- Engagement with integral or dialectical frameworks
- Leadership challenges requiring integration of complexity
- Mentoring from E8+ individuals
- Time and space for emergent integration

When to create holding environment (letting emergence happen)

For emergent qualities (Category 2 from Section 7)—Connectedness, Inner Compass, Humility, Openness—direct development is not possible. These qualities emerge as side-effects of stage transformation. The developmental approach is creating conditions that support emergence.

Creating conditions for emergence:

Provide practices, experiences, and relationships known to correlate with developmental transformation:

- Contemplative practices (meditation, mindfulness, body-based awareness)
- Nature immersion and wilderness experiences
- Cross-cultural dialogue and immersion
- Service and contribution to larger purposes
- Developmental relationships and community
- Challenging experiences that stretch current capacity
- Regular reflection and meaning-making practices

Trust the developmental process over time rather than demanding measurable outcomes:

- Accept that some developments take years to manifest
- Resist pressure to quantify what resists quantification
- Focus on inputs (practices, experiences, relationships) rather than outputs (measured qualities)
- Assess through long-term outcomes and qualitative shifts
- Trust that structural development enables emergent qualities naturally

Create developmental culture rather than measuring developmental achievement:

- Build organizational norms that value inquiry over certainty
- Create space for multiple ways of knowing
- Support diverse developmental pathways
- Normalize developmental struggle and confusion
- Celebrate growth without comparing stages
- Invest in conditions known to support development

Resist the temptation to measure and control:

- Don't create assessments that measure emergent qualities directly
- Avoid gaming metrics by teaching performance of qualities
- Trust process indicators (engagement with practices) over outcome indicators (measured emergence)
- Recognize that pressure for quick measurable results undermines developmental work

Example—Supporting emergence of Connectedness:

Don't: Run a "Connectedness training program" with pre-post assessments measuring participants' sense of connection to nature and humanity.

Do: Create opportunities for:

- Regular nature immersion without agenda
- Contemplative practices that expand awareness
- Systems thinking education that reveals interconnection
- Service work that builds empathy and care
- Community practices that transcend individual ego
- Time and space for integration

Then trust that over time, as developmental capacity grows, genuine Connectedness (as identity expansion rather than intellectual belief) will emerge naturally in those whose development moves in that direction.

Integration: The art of developmental facilitation

Skilled developmental facilitators integrate all three principles fluidly:

They **meet people where they are** through careful observation of actual developmental capacity, not assumed stage based on demographics or role. They use language and concepts accessible to current stage while subtly inviting exploration of the next stage.

They **provide stage-appropriate challenges** at the edge of current capacity—creating optimal mismatch that stimulates growth without overwhelming. They recognize that edges differ for each person even within same stage.

They **distinguish skills from structure** in real-time, shifting between skills training, developmental edge-work, and creating holding environment as appropriate. They know when to teach, when to challenge, and when to simply hold space.

This requires:

- Deep understanding of developmental theory
- Extensive practice observing developmental patterns
- Capacity to work at multiple developmental levels simultaneously
- Wisdom to know when to act and when to wait
- Patience with developmental timescales
- Humility about limits of intervention

- Trust in the developmental process

The best developmental facilitators are themselves at later stages (typically E7-E8+) not because earlier stages can't facilitate development, but because holding space for development beyond one's own stage is structurally difficult. E6 facilitators excel at supporting E5→E6 transition but often struggle with E6→E7 (which requires letting go of the certainty E6 values). E7 facilitators understand E6→E7 transition but may struggle to support E7→E8 integration (being themselves still in the territory of multiplicity rather than integration).

This doesn't mean only E8+ people should do developmental work—every stage can support development at and slightly beyond its own level. But it does mean organizations should thoughtfully match facilitators to participants' developmental needs, and invest in facilitators' own ongoing development.

These three principles—meet people where they are, support stage-appropriate challenges, distinguish skills from structure—provide practical foundation for developmental work. But they are principles to guide practice, not formulas to follow mechanically. The art of developmental facilitation lies in responding to the unique individual or group before you, in this moment, with their particular configuration of readiness, resistance, resources, and developmental trajectory. The principles provide map; the territory requires presence, discernment, and wisdom cultivated through extensive practice.

10. ORGANIZATIONAL APPLICATIONS

From individual to collective development

The previous section focused on supporting individual developmental journeys. But organizations are not simply collections of individuals—they are systems with their own cultures, structures, and collective consciousness. Understanding the vertical dimension transforms not just how we develop people but how we design organizations themselves.

Organizations, like individuals, have developmental centers of gravity. While any organization contains people at multiple stages, there is typically a dominant stage that shapes culture, decision-making processes, value systems, and organizational structures. An E5-centered organization feels fundamentally different from an E6-centered one, which differs profoundly from an E7-E8 capable organization—even when working toward similar sustainability goals with comparable resources.

This matters immensely because organizations unconsciously design themselves in ways that work for their center of gravity while creating friction for those at other stages. An E6-centered sustainability organization may puzzle over why it struggles to retain E5 employees ("they seem disengaged from our values") or why E7 consultants leave frustrated ("they found our culture too rigid"). The organization isn't failing—it's succeeding at being E6-centered, which inevitably creates both fit and misfit for different developmental profiles.

The challenge: How do we create organizations that can support developmental diversity—enabling people at different stages to contribute effectively while also supporting developmental growth? There is no single answer, but understanding the developmental dimension illuminates possibilities.

Application 1: Building developmentally appropriate cultures

Organizations need culture—shared understandings of how we work together, what we value, how we make decisions. But effective culture looks different depending on the organization's developmental center of gravity. Trying to impose E8-level culture on an E5-centered organization doesn't create transformation—it creates confusion and resistance. Better: design culture appropriate to actual center of gravity while creating conditions that support natural developmental evolution.

E4-dominant organizations

Organizations centered at E4 are characterized by strong group identity, clear hierarchies, established procedures, and conventional approaches. This is not deficiency—it's a coherent way of organizing that serves certain purposes well.

Cultural characteristics:

- Clear roles with explicit expectations
- Strong emphasis on procedures and protocols
- Decisions made by designated authorities
- Values transmitted through modeling and socialization rather than abstract articulation
- Team identity and belonging emphasized

- Loyalty and consistency valued
- Change happens through leadership direction
- "We've always done it this way" carries positive weight

Strengths for sustainability work:

- Reliable execution of established practices
- Strong team cohesion enables coordinated action
- Clear accountability through role structure
- Effective transmission of proven approaches
- Stable implementation of policies and procedures
- Good at scaling practices once established

Limitations:

- Difficulty with innovation and adaptation
- Resistance to changes that disrupt group norms
- Limited capacity for complex systems thinking
- Challenges engaging with paradigmatic diversity
- Values as conformity rather than conscious commitment

IDG focus for E4-centered organizations:

- **Trust:** Building and maintaining relational bonds
- **Communication skills:** Clear, respectful, team-oriented
- **Appreciation:** Recognizing contributions, building positive culture
- **Co-creation skills:** Teamwork within established structures
- **Presence:** Being fully present with colleagues

Design implications:

When building sustainability culture in E4-centered organizations, work with rather than against the stage's structure:

- Establish clear sustainability procedures and roles
- Build sustainability into "how we do things here"
- Use authority figures to model sustainable practices
- Create team-based sustainability initiatives
- Celebrate collective sustainability achievements
- Make sustainability part of organizational identity
- Provide clear guidance on expectations
- Build on existing group strengths and cohesion

Avoid:

- Requiring individuals to challenge organizational norms
- Expecting autonomous initiative without clear role authorization
- Using abstract sustainability principles without concrete procedures
- Pushing complex systems thinking before establishing basic practices
- Creating ambiguity about expectations or roles

Example: A municipal recycling department (E4-centered) successfully builds sustainability culture by establishing clear protocols, having supervisors model proper procedures, creating team competitions around waste reduction, and making "we're the sustainability leaders in the region" part of collective identity. This approach works far better than appealing to abstract planetary values or expecting employees to independently innovate new practices.

E6-dominant organizations

Organizations centered at E6 are characterized by principle-based culture, high standards, individual accountability, and systematic approaches. This stage dominates many sustainability-focused organizations, particularly NGOs and purpose-driven companies.

Cultural characteristics:

- Explicit articulation of values and principles
- Strong individual accountability and responsibility
- Goals, metrics, and performance management systems
- Merit-based advancement and recognition
- Emphasis on competence and achievement
- Long-term strategic planning
- Principled decision-making
- Change driven by rational analysis and compelling arguments
- "Because it's the right thing to do" carries moral weight

Strengths for sustainability work:

- Principled commitment to sustainability regardless of external pressure
- Systematic implementation of comprehensive strategies
- High standards and rigorous accountability
- Long-term orientation beyond quarterly pressures
- Analytical capacity for complex problem-solving
- Moral courage to pursue difficult changes
- Clear leadership and direction

Limitations:

- Can be experienced as rigid, demanding, or moralistic
- Difficulty with genuine paradigmatic diversity
- Values as universals can feel exclusive or colonizing
- May prioritize internal standards over stakeholder engagement
- Limited flexibility in face of genuine complexity
- Blind to own paradigmatic assumptions
- Can become dogmatic about particular approaches

IDG focus for E6-centered organizations:

- **Integrity and Authenticity:** Acting consistently with stated values
- **Critical thinking:** Rigorous analysis and evidence-based decisions
- **Perseverance:** Sustained effort toward long-term goals
- **Long-term orientation:** Strategic planning and visioning

- **Self-awareness:** Reflective capacity and self-regulation
- **Courage:** Standing for principles under pressure

Design implications:

When building or working with E6-centered sustainability organizations:

- Articulate clear values and principles explicitly
- Create robust goal-setting and accountability systems
- Build culture of high performance and achievement
- Provide opportunities for individual contribution and recognition
- Use data and analysis to guide decisions
- Establish clear standards and expectations
- Support principled leadership
- Create systematic approaches to sustainability challenges

But also recognize limitations:

- May struggle with genuine stakeholder diversity
- Can inadvertently exclude those with different value frameworks
- Risk of rigidity and dogmatism
- May need support developing E7-E8 capacities for some work

The E6 paradox in sustainability organizations:

Many sustainability organizations are E6-centered precisely because E6 consciousness enables the principled commitment and sustained effort sustainability requires. But this same consciousness can create barriers to the transformative, paradigm-crossing work that global sustainability ultimately demands. The organization attracts people who share its values (good) but may struggle to genuinely partner with those who don't (problematic).

Example: An environmental advocacy organization (E6-centered) builds powerful culture around scientific rigor, policy analysis, and principled advocacy. This enables effective work on many issues. But when attempting to partner with indigenous communities working from entirely different epistemologies and values, the organization struggles—repeatedly experiencing indigenous partners as "not rigorous enough" or "too spiritual" while indigenous partners experience the organization as "colonizing" and "missing the point." The limitation is developmental, not intentional.

E7-E8 capable organizations

Organizations with significant E7-E8 capacity—either in leadership or distributed throughout—can create culture that's qualitatively different. These are rare, particularly at scale, but increasingly necessary for addressing wicked sustainability challenges.

Cultural characteristics:

- Comfort with paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty
- Principle-driven yet context-sensitive
- Multiple frameworks held simultaneously as tools

- Genuine capacity for paradigmatic diversity
- Decisions emerge from dialogue rather than analysis alone
- Both/and thinking rather than either/or
- Change as continuous adaptation rather than discrete initiatives
- Power more distributed and relational
- "It depends" is acceptable answer when it actually does
- Wisdom valued alongside expertise

Strengths for sustainability work:

- Genuine stakeholder engagement across difference
- Capacity for transformative collaboration
- Ability to work with irreducible complexity
- Innovation through paradigm integration
- Flexible adaptation to emergence
- Bridging across worldview boundaries
- Holding long-term vision while responding to present
- Integration of head, heart, and hands

Limitations:

- Can be experienced as unclear or insufficiently committed by E5-E6 employees
- May struggle to provide structure needed by earlier stages
- Risk of privileging complexity over clarity
- Difficulty scaling (E7-E8 capacity relatively rare)
- May undervalue systematic execution
- Can get lost in dialogue without reaching decisions

IDG focus for E7-E8 capable organizations:

- **Perspective skills:** Genuinely inhabiting multiple worldviews
- **Complexity awareness:** Working with systemic dynamics
- **Co-creation skills:** Transformative collaboration across difference
- **Sense-making:** Creating coherence amid multiplicity
- **Humility:** Acting without ego-preoccupation
- **Connectedness:** Expanded sense of belonging
- **Inner Compass:** Integrated values orientation

Design implications:

Building E7-E8 capable culture requires:

- Leadership at E7-E8 (cannot be built from earlier stages)
- Explicit valuing of multiple ways of knowing
- Structures flexible enough for emergence yet robust enough for action
- Practices that support ongoing development
- Genuine rather than performative diversity
- Comfort with not-knowing and ambiguity
- Decision processes that include but transcend analysis
- Regular reflection on paradigmatic assumptions

- Cross-paradigm dialogue and partnership

The sustainability advantage:

E7-E8 capable organizations have unique capacity for the most complex, transformative sustainability challenges:

- Multi-stakeholder partnerships across genuine difference
- Integration of diverse knowledge systems
- Navigation of wicked problems resisting technical solutions
- Bridging between competing paradigms and interests
- Creating solutions not contained in any original position
- Holding space for emergence of genuinely new possibilities

But they remain rare because:

- E7-E8 developmental capacity is uncommon (perhaps 10-20% of adult population)
- Building such culture requires critical mass of post-conventional capacity
- Earlier-stage actors often experience E7-E8 culture as unclear or uncommitted
- Pressure for clarity and certainty pushes back toward E6 structures

Example: A sustainability consulting network (E7-E8 capable) works fluidly across corporate, NGO, governmental, and indigenous contexts. Partners can genuinely engage with each paradigm without requiring convergence. Meetings balance structure and emergence. Decisions integrate analytical and intuitive knowing. The culture feels spacious yet focused, clear yet flexible. But new employees from E5-E6 backgrounds often struggle initially, wanting more clarity about "the right approach" or explicit procedures. Some thrive and develop; others leave for more conventionally structured environments.

The challenge: Supporting developmental diversity

Real organizations contain people at multiple stages. Even organizations centered at one stage have developmental diversity. The challenge: How to create culture that works across this diversity without compromising coherence?

Strategies for developmental inclusivity:

1. Differentiate role requirements

Not all roles require the same developmental capacity. Match complexity of role demands to typical stage capacities:

- Highly procedural roles with clear expectations: Can be performed excellently at E5
- Roles requiring sustained independent judgment: Need E6
- Roles requiring paradigm-crossing or transformative collaboration: Require E7-E8

This isn't about devaluing any stage but about matching demands to capacities. An E5 employee may execute sustainability procedures more reliably than an E7 employee who gets lost questioning the framework.

2. Create stage-appropriate development pathways

Rather than single leadership development track, create multiple pathways:

- E5 pathway: Build toward E6 through increasing autonomy and responsibility
- E6 pathway: Strengthen principled leadership while introducing paradigm awareness
- E7 pathway: Support integration and capacity for E8 complexity

Different people progress at different rates. Some find their stage fits their life context and remain centered there. Others develop continuously. Both are valid.

3. Build developmental culture that supports growth

Create conditions supporting natural development without forcing it:

- Provide developmental practices and relationships
- Create challenging assignments at edge of capacity
- Support reflection and meaning-making
- Allow adequate time for integration
- Normalize developmental struggle
- Celebrate growth without comparing stages

4. Use cross-stage collaboration strategically

Mixed-stage teams can be powerful when designed well:

- E5-E6 members provide reliable execution
- E6 members provide strategic direction and standards
- E7-E8 members facilitate across complexity and paradigm differences

But random mixing often creates frustration. Better: understand what each stage contributes and design collaboration to leverage this.

5. Communicate at multiple levels simultaneously

Skilled leaders can communicate same message in ways accessible across stages:

To E5: "This sustainability initiative is who we are as a team" To E6: "It's the right thing to do based on our principles" To E7-E8: "One important framework among others for engaging this complexity"

All hearing the message in their own terms.

Application 2: Leadership development programs

Most leadership development programs implicitly assume a stage-uniform audience and design curriculum accordingly. This explains many persistent disappointments: E6-designed programs fail with E5 participants; E7 content confuses E6 audiences; sophisticated curricula don't translate to behavioral change.

Redesigning leadership development with developmental dimension:

Assess developmental readiness first

Before designing curriculum, assess participants' developmental center of gravity—not to label or judge, but to design appropriately.

Assessment approaches:

- Structured developmental interviews
- Observation of meaning-making patterns in case discussions
- 360-degree feedback focused on developmental indicators
- Formal assessments (WUSCT, Leadership Development Profile)
- Self-assessment with developmental framework

This reveals whether you have:

- Relatively homogeneous cohort (design for that stage)
- Developmentally diverse group (differentiate programming)
- Critical mass at particular transition (focus there)

Sequence learning: Horizontal then vertical

Most programs mix skill training and developmental challenge without distinction. Better: explicit sequencing.

Phase 1: Horizontal skill-building at current stage

- Establish competence within current capacity
- Build confidence and efficacy
- Create foundation for vertical challenge
- Typical duration: 2-4 months

Phase 2: Developmental edge-work

- Introduce stage-appropriate challenges (per Section 9)
- Create disorienting dilemmas
- Support through uncertainty
- Typical duration: 6-12 months

Phase 3: Integration and application

- Make sense of new perspectives
- Integrate insights into practice
- Stabilize new capacities
- Typical duration: 3-6 months

Example curriculum:

For E5→E6 leadership development:

- Phase 1: Build skills in goal-setting, planning, self-management, principled decision-making
- Phase 2: Take on challenging assignments requiring autonomous judgment, receive developmental coaching, practice self-authorship
- Phase 3: Integrate learning into leadership practice, establish sustainable patterns

For E6→E7 leadership development:

- Phase 1: Strengthen strategic thinking, stakeholder management, change leadership
- Phase 2: Encounter incommensurable worldviews, question assumptions, explore paradigmatic diversity, practice comfort with ambiguity
- Phase 3: Integrate multiple perspectives while maintaining capacity for action

Create stage-similar cohorts for some activities

Developmental learning happens best with others at similar stages—shared struggles and language facilitate integration. Create cohort sessions by developmental stage:

- E5-E6 cohort: Focus on self-authorship challenges
- E6-E7 cohort: Explore paradigm awareness and uncertainty
- E7-E8 cohort: Work on integration and committed action

Participants feel understood and supported rather than behind or ahead.

Design cross-stage mentoring for other activities

Different activities benefit from cross-stage interaction. Strategic mentoring pairs:

- E6 mentors for E5 participants (model self-authorship)
- E7 mentors for E6 participants (introduce paradigm awareness)
- E8 mentors for E7 participants (support integration)

But also:

- E5 participants mentor E7 on execution and grounding
- E6 participants mentor E8 on principled clarity

Developmental sophistication doesn't mean superiority—each stage has wisdom to offer.

Build in integration time

Most programs move too fast, packing in content without adequate processing time. Developmental transformation requires:

- Time between sessions for experience and reflection
- Regular journaling or reflective practices

- Integration coaching between cohort sessions
- Reduced content, increased depth
- Explicit invitations to not-know

Typical mistake: 6-month program with monthly 2-day intensives. Better: 12-18 month program with quarterly 2-day sessions and monthly integration calls.

Measure different outcomes for different journeys

Stop measuring all participants against single outcome model. Instead:

For E5 participants, measure:

- Growth in self-authorship
- Capacity for autonomous judgment
- Clarity about personal values
- Effective goal-setting and self-management

For E6 participants, measure:

- Awareness of paradigmatic assumptions
- Capacity to work with ambiguity
- Effectiveness across worldview differences
- Sophistication of systems thinking

For E7 participants, measure:

- Integration of multiple perspectives
- Capacity for committed action amid uncertainty
- Effectiveness facilitating across complexity
- Dialectical thinking

Success isn't everyone reaching same endpoint—it's each person developing from their starting point.

Application 3: Change management

Change initiatives persistently fail despite sophisticated methodologies, adequate resources, and committed leadership. Developmental analysis reveals a common pattern: developmentally mismatched change design.

Why change initiatives fail: Developmental analysis

The typical pattern:

1. **E6 change leaders** (often consultants, executives, or change agents) design rational, principle-based change:
 - Clear vision articulating new direction
 - Logical case for change with data and analysis
 - Systematic implementation plan

- Explicit new values or principles
- Performance metrics for accountability
- 2. **E4-E6 employee population** experiences this very differently across stages:
 - **E4 employees** experience change as threatening group identity and stability ("This isn't who we are")
 - **E6 employees aligned with new principles** embrace change
 - **E6 employees attached to different principles** resist intellectually
 - **E7 employees** may resist what feels like rigid new dogma
- 3. **Result:** Resistance framed as "lack of buy-in" or "resistance to change" rather than developmental mismatch

Leadership becomes frustrated: "We explained it clearly, made rational case, have right principles. Why don't they get it?"

Answer: They do "get it"—they're responding to it from their developmental structure, which processes the change differently than leadership intends.

Developmentally-informed change

Step 1: Diagnose organizational center of gravity

Before designing change, understand actual developmental landscape:

- What stage is organizational culture centered at?
- What's the developmental distribution?
- Where is leadership centered?
- What developmental capacities does change require?

Step 2: Design change process appropriate to that stage

For E4-centered organizations:

- Maintain clear authority structure throughout change
- Preserve core group identity while evolving specific practices
- Use respected leaders to model new approaches
- Make change incremental rather than revolutionary
- Build on existing strengths and traditions
- Create clear new procedures rather than abstract new principles
- Emphasize team continuity through change

For E6-centered organizations:

- Articulate compelling principled case for change
- Show how change aligns with or improves on current principles
- Provide clear goals and metrics
- Give individuals clarity about their role and responsibility
- Appeal to long-term strategic thinking
- Allow for systematic planning and implementation
- Respect need for analysis and understanding

For E7-E8 capable organizations:

- Create space for multiple perspectives on change
- Allow emergence rather than detailed planning
- Trust distributed decision-making
- Frame change as evolution rather than revolution
- Welcome ambiguity and adaptation
- Integrate diverse viewpoints
- Focus on sense-making over compliance

Step 3: Build developmental capacity as part of change

Some changes can be implemented within current developmental stage. Others require developmental growth to truly succeed.

Changes requiring E4→E6 development:

- Moving from rule-following to judgment-based decision-making
- Shifting from group conformity to principled autonomy
- Increasing individual accountability and initiative

Changes requiring E6→E7 development:

- Embracing genuine paradigmatic diversity
- Working with ambiguity and emergence
- Moving from principled certainty to contextual discernment

Changes requiring E7→E8 development:

- Integrating multiple incommensurable frameworks
- Leading transformative multi-stakeholder collaboration
- Holding vision while remaining flexibly responsive

When change requires developmental growth, include explicit developmental support:

- Provide developmental coaching and mentoring
- Create safe space for exploring edges
- Allow adequate time for transformation
- Build practices supporting development
- Accept that some individuals may not develop at pace change requires

Step 4: Accept that some changes require vertical development to implement

This is crucial: Some changes are not implementable within current organizational developmental capacity. You can mandate new behaviors, but without structural capacity, they remain superficial compliance.

Examples:

Implementing genuine stakeholder engagement in E5-E6 organization:

- People go through motions but don't genuinely learn from stakeholders
- Stakeholder input gets filtered through existing frameworks
- Engagement becomes check-box rather than transformative
- Without E7-E8 capacity, genuine engagement isn't possible

Implementing distributed decision-making in E4 organization:

- People wait for authority to tell them what to do
- Decisions get pushed back up hierarchy
- Anxiety about "getting it wrong" dominates
- Without E6 self-authorship, genuine distribution fails

Implementing complex adaptive strategy in E6 organization:

- People want clear plan and metrics
- Emergence feels like lack of leadership
- Ambiguity creates anxiety and resistance
- Without E7-E8 capacity, adaptive strategy feels like chaos

When this occurs, three options:

1. **Redesign the change** to be implementable at current stage (may lose transformative potential)
2. **Invest in developing organizational capacity** (takes years, not months)
3. **Bring in people with requisite capacity** (but culture may not support them)

There's no easy answer, but recognizing the developmental reality prevents wasted effort trying to implement changes the organization is structurally incapable of executing.

Case example: E6 sustainability strategy in E4 organization

A manufacturing company (E4-centered culture with E6 executive team) brings in sustainability consultants who develop comprehensive ESG strategy with:

- Clear principles and values
- Sophisticated metrics and targets
- Individual accountability systems
- Systematic implementation plan

Executive team approves enthusiastically. Consultants depart. Implementation begins.

Within six months:

- Employees comply minimally but without engagement
- Sustainability becomes "extra work" rather than "how we work"
- Metrics get gamed or ignored

- Initiative loses momentum

The developmental analysis:

Strategy designed at E6 (principled, systematic, individually accountable) implemented in E4 culture (procedural, group-oriented, authority-driven). Mismatch inevitable.

Developmentally-informed alternative:

1. Assess culture is E4-centered
2. Design E4-appropriate implementation:
 - Clear procedures integrated into existing workflows
 - Team-based rather than individual accountability
 - Authority figures model sustainable practices
 - Make sustainability part of "who we are" identity
 - Celebrate collective achievements
 - Build on existing relationships and group cohesion
3. Include developmental support for E4→E6 growth in key leaders
4. Accept that sophisticated ESG strategy may need simplification to be executable
5. Plan for evolution as capacity grows rather than expecting immediate transformation

This approach may feel less impressive to E6 consultants and executives, but it actually works in the organization's developmental reality.

These three applications—organizational culture, leadership development, and change management—demonstrate how understanding the vertical dimension transforms organizational practice. The principles remain constant: assess actual developmental capacity, design appropriately, support development when needed, and accept that some aspirations require developmental growth to achieve.

Organizations that understand this stop being mystified by persistent failures and start creating realistic, effective approaches to building inner developmental capacity. They accept longer timeframes, invest in developmental support, differentiate rather than homogenize, and ultimately create more genuinely transformative change because they're working with rather than against developmental reality.

11. THE BOTH/AND OF HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL

Toward integrated inner development

This essay began with a blind spot: the IDG framework comprehensively maps the 25 skills and qualities needed for addressing complex global challenges, yet it treats these capacities as if they were uniformly accessible across all individuals and collectives. Through examining Self-Awareness, Complexity Awareness, Perspective Skills, Connectedness, Inner Compass, and patterns across all 25 qualities, we have seen that this assumption obscures a crucial dimension—the vertical depth that determines not just how well someone can perform these qualities, but what they fundamentally mean and what is structurally possible.

The thesis is straightforward but consequential: each of the 25 IDG qualities has a developmental depth dimension that fundamentally shapes its manifestation. These are not merely skills that can be trained to higher or lower levels of proficiency within a stable meaning-making structure. Rather, they are capacities that transform qualitatively as the structure of consciousness itself transforms through the stages of ego development.

But recognizing this vertical dimension does not diminish the value of the IDG framework—it enriches it, making our developmental efforts more realistic, more effective, and more compassionate toward the actual humans undertaking this difficult and necessary work.

The complementarity

The IDG framework and ego development theory need each other. Neither alone provides a complete map for inner development work.

What the IDG framework provides:

The IDG framework's genius lies in its accessibility and comprehensiveness. It achieves what developmental theory alone cannot:

Accessible language for non-specialists. Terms like "Inner Compass," "Connectedness," and "Complexity Awareness" communicate immediately to practitioners, policymakers, and organizational leaders in ways that "post-conventional ego development" or "fourth-order meaning-making" do not. This accessibility is not weakness—it's what enables the framework to actually influence practice beyond academic circles.

Comprehensive inventory of needed capacities. The 25 skills and qualities provide actionable roadmap for development. Rather than abstract "develop to higher stages," the framework offers concrete qualities to cultivate. This specificity enables curriculum design, assessment development, and practical intervention.

Common language across organizations and sectors. When sustainability professionals from corporate, governmental, NGO, and academic contexts can reference a shared framework, collaboration becomes possible. The IDG language creates bridges that developmental theory alone cannot.

Political viability. The framework emerged through extensive consultation with practitioners and researchers, representing genuine consensus about what matters. It doesn't privilege particular worldviews or cultural perspectives (at least not explicitly), making it broadly acceptable across diverse contexts. Developmental theory, with its implicit hierarchy of stages, faces more resistance.

Practical focus on capabilities. By emphasizing skills and qualities rather than stages, the framework maintains focus on what people can do rather than what level they've achieved. This pragmatic orientation serves practice well, even if it obscures theoretical depth.

What ego development theory adds:

Developmental theory provides what the IDG framework cannot:

Understanding of why some IDGs remain inaccessible despite training. When Connectedness training fails, when Inner Compass seems elusive, when Complexity Awareness doesn't stick—developmental theory explains why. Some qualities emerge from structural transformation, not horizontal learning. This understanding prevents wasted effort and misplaced blame.

Realistic expectations about what's possible at each stage. Rather than assuming all 25 qualities are accessible to all people with sufficient training, we can recognize that some require developmental prerequisites. This enables appropriate goal-setting and prevents disappointment when E5 individuals don't demonstrate E8 capacities.

Guidance on developmental sequencing. Not all IDGs should be developed simultaneously or in any order. Some are foundational for others. Some emerge naturally as development proceeds. Developmental theory illuminates these dependencies, enabling more intelligent sequencing of development efforts.

Recognition of structural transformation vs. behavioral change. The distinction between horizontal skill-building and vertical development is crucial. Treating all IDGs as trainable skills leads to superficial adoption of language and behaviors without genuine transformation. Developmental theory clarifies when structure must change rather than just behavior.

Explanation of persistent implementation failures. When sustainability strategies fail despite good intentions, adequate resources, and sophisticated design, developmental mismatch often explains why. E6 strategies in E4 organizations, transformative collaboration without post-conventional capacity, values-based culture creating exclusion—developmental analysis reveals patterns that otherwise remain mystifying.

Framework for long-term growth. While the IDG framework describes what capacities are needed, developmental theory provides map for the multi-year, multi-decade journey of growing into those capacities. It offers realistic timeframes, identifies key transitions, and clarifies what supports development.

Practical synthesis

For those working with inner development in any capacity—as coaches, consultants, educators, organizational leaders, or practitioners—the integration of IDG framework and developmental theory offers concrete guidance:

For individual practitioners

Use the IDG framework to identify and communicate what's needed. The 25 qualities provide clear, accessible language for discussing inner development with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders. The framework's comprehensiveness ensures nothing crucial is overlooked.

Use developmental theory to understand readiness and design interventions. Before designing development support, assess developmental stage. Match interventions to actual capacity. Sequence skill-building and structural development appropriately. Set realistic timeframes based on whether horizontal or vertical development is required.

Hold both frameworks lightly. These are tools for understanding, not truth claims about reality. They illuminate patterns and enable more effective work, but should never become dogma or used to label, judge, or limit people. The map is not the territory—the actual human before you always exceeds any framework's capacity to capture their complexity.

Recognize your own developmental limitations. Supporting development beyond your own stage is structurally difficult. Invest in your own ongoing development. Seek supervision or collaboration with those at later stages when working at edges of your capacity. Be honest about when you're not the right developmental support for a particular person or challenge.

Integrate multiple ways of knowing. Developmental theory provides cognitive framework, but genuine developmental support requires more than intellectual understanding. Cultivate embodied wisdom, intuitive sensing, relational attunement, and presence. The best developmental facilitators work from integrated knowing that includes but transcends conceptual maps.

For the IDG initiative

The IDG framework could evolve to more explicitly acknowledge the developmental dimension while maintaining its accessibility and practical focus:

Consider IDG 3.0 that acknowledges vertical development. This need not compromise accessibility. Simple indicators could note which qualities are primarily skills, which are emergent, which are hybrids. Brief descriptions could acknowledge that qualities manifest differently at different stages without requiring readers to master developmental theory.

Create supplementary materials for practitioners trained in developmental theory. More detailed resources could elaborate how each IDG manifests across stages, what developmental capacities enable each quality, and how to support stage-appropriate development. These materials serve practitioners ready for depth while keeping the main framework accessible.

Support research on developmental manifestation of the 25 qualities. How does Communication Skills differ at E5, E6, E7, E8? What developmental capacities enable Complexity

Awareness? When does Inner Compass genuinely emerge vs. being intellectually adopted? Systematic research would provide evidence base for developmental dimension.

Develop stage-appropriate assessment and development resources. Rather than single assessment tool, create differentiated instruments appropriate to different developmental levels. Design development programs explicitly sequenced for different stage transitions. Provide guidance on matching interventions to developmental readiness.

Acknowledge the vertical dimension in IDG communications. When presenting the framework, explicitly note that these qualities develop over time, manifest differently as people mature, and that some require structural transformation rather than just skill training. This sets realistic expectations without overwhelming audiences with developmental complexity.

Build community of practice that includes developmental perspective. Create forums where practitioners can discuss developmental aspects of IDG work, share learning about stage-appropriate interventions, and develop collective wisdom about integrating horizontal and vertical dimensions.

For the sustainability field

The developmental lens has profound implications for how we approach sustainability transformation:

Recognize that solving wicked problems requires post-conventional consciousness. The most complex sustainability challenges—those involving genuine paradigmatic diversity, irreducible complexity, and transformative change—cannot be addressed through E5-E6 consciousness alone, no matter how sophisticated the analysis or how committed the effort. This isn't elitism—it's structural reality. Investing in vertical development is not "nice to have" but essential for effectiveness.

Invest in vertical development, not just horizontal skill-building. This means redirecting resources from pure skills training toward developmental support: contemplative practices, developmental relationships, challenging assignments, cross-cultural immersion, reflective practices, and crucially, time. Vertical development requires years, not quarters. Funders and organizations must accept longer timeframes for genuinely transformative work.

Build organizations and networks that support developmental diversity. Rather than seeking developmental homogeneity, create systems where people at different stages can contribute effectively while also being supported in their natural developmental progression. This requires sophisticated design: differentiated roles, multiple development pathways, stage-appropriate cultures, and leadership at later stages who can hold space for developmental complexity.

Accept that some transformations take time—measured in years not quarters. Sustainability transformation is ultimately human development applied to our relationship with each other and the planet. Human development unfolds on its own timeline. We can create conditions that support it, provide practices and relationships that facilitate it, but we cannot force or accelerate it beyond what consciousness can structurally integrate. This requires patience that runs counter to urgency culture.

Invest in developing developmental capacity in key leverage points. Not everyone needs post-conventional development for sustainability work to succeed. But we need critical mass in crucial positions: facilitators of multi-stakeholder processes, leaders of cross-paradigm partnerships, designers of transformative initiatives, educators shaping next generation. Strategic investment in developing these individuals' capacity creates disproportionate impact.

Create space for emergence rather than imposing solutions. E6 consciousness wants to solve problems through better analysis, clearer strategy, more rigorous implementation. Sometimes this works. But for truly wicked challenges, solutions must emerge through processes that include but transcend rational planning. This requires E7-E8 capacity to hold space for emergence while resisting premature closure and accepting genuine not-knowing.

Bridge between stages rather than privileging one. The sustainability field needs contributions from all developmental stages: E5 reliable execution, E6 principled strategy, E7 paradigm awareness, E8 integrative facilitation. Rather than attempting to convert everyone to post-conventional consciousness, create bridges enabling effective collaboration across developmental diversity. The goal is not uniform advancement but appropriate capacity in right places doing right work.

The bootstrapping challenge

Acknowledging the developmental dimension reveals a paradox: we need E7-E8 consciousness to design systems that develop E7-E8 consciousness. How do we work with consciousness we don't yet fully possess?

This is the bootstrapping problem inherent in all developmental work. We operate at the edge of our own understanding, using the consciousness we have to create conditions for consciousness we don't yet fully embody. This is simultaneously humbling and hopeful.

Humbling because we recognize our own limitations. Each of us, no matter how developed, remains embedded in structures that constrain what we can see and what we can do. The E6 practitioner cannot fully design E7→E8 transition support. The E7 consultant cannot fully facilitate E8 integration. We work at our edges, which means working with our own blindspots.

Hopeful because development actually happens. People do move through stages, consciousness does transform, capacities do emerge. Not everyone, not on demand, not on our preferred timeline—but it happens. Human development toward greater complexity, inclusivity, and integration is observable reality, not wishful thinking. We participate in this developmental stream, supporting others' growth while continuing our own.

The bootstrapping solution is collective and transgenerational:

Collective: We need diverse developmental perspectives in collaboration. E6 practitioners bring principled clarity. E7 bring paradigm awareness. E8 bring integrative capacity. Together, we create better systems than any stage alone could design. The IDG initiative itself exemplifies this—bringing together practitioners and researchers at multiple stages to create framework useful across stages.

Transgenerational: We're not trying to solve sustainability in one generation. We're building capacities that will continue developing across generations. Today's work creates conditions for

tomorrow's development. We may not see the full flowering of post-conventional sustainability consciousness in our lifetimes, but we can tend the soil from which it grows.

The invitation

This essay has explored the vertical dimension of horizontal capabilities—how the 25 Inner Development Goals manifest differently across developmental stages, why this matters for sustainability work, and how we can support development more effectively. But analysis is only valuable if it informs action.

The invitation, then, is to integrate the developmental dimension into your work, whatever that work may be:

If you're a coach or consultant: Study developmental theory not as academic knowledge but as lens for understanding the humans before you. Learn to assess stage, design stage-appropriate interventions, and support transitions. Invest in your own ongoing development—you cannot guide others beyond where you've traveled.

If you're an organizational leader: Understand your organization's developmental center of gravity and build culture appropriate to that stage while creating conditions for growth. Don't expect E8 capacities from E5 structures. Invest in vertical development of key leaders. Accept longer timeframes for transformative change.

If you're a sustainability practitioner: Recognize that your most complex challenges may require post-conventional consciousness to navigate effectively. Seek post-conventional partners and facilitators for paradigm-crossing work. Support your own development toward greater complexity and integration. Build patience for developmental timescales.

If you're an educator: Design learning that distinguishes skills from structure, horizontal from vertical. Assess learners' developmental readiness. Sequence appropriately. Create edge experiences that support growth. Accept that genuine learning may look like confusion and uncertainty rather than quick comprehension.

If you're a researcher: Study how the IDG qualities actually manifest across stages empirically. Document what supports stage transitions. Build evidence base for developmental approaches to sustainability. Bridge academic developmental psychology and practical sustainability work.

If you're a funder: Support initiatives that include vertical development, not just skill training. Accept longer grant periods for developmental work. Resist pressure to measure what resists quantification. Fund contemplative practices, developmental relationships, challenging experiences, and integration time.

If you're simply someone committed to your own development: Find practices, relationships, and experiences that support your growth. Seek challenges at edge of your capacity. Reflect deeply on your meaning-making. Engage with perspectives genuinely different from your own. Be patient with your own developmental process. Trust that consciousness develops through engagement with complexity, not escape from it.

Final reflection

The 25 Inner Development Goals are not just skills to be learned but horizons to be grown into—each quality deepening in meaning and manifestation as we ourselves develop. A person at E5 brings one quality of Self-Awareness, Perspective-Taking, and Connectedness. That same person at E8 brings qualitatively different manifestations of these same capacities—not because they trained harder but because the structure of consciousness itself transformed.

This recognition doesn't diminish the power of the IDG framework. It enriches it by revealing that inner development is not merely accumulation of capacities but transformation of the self that holds those capacities. It's not just about learning new skills but about becoming someone who can embody those skills authentically.

Understanding the vertical dimension makes our developmental work more realistic because we stop expecting transformative outcomes from non-transformative interventions. It makes our work more effective because we match support to actual developmental needs. And perhaps most importantly, it makes our work more compassionate—we meet people where they actually are rather than where we wish they were, we honor the validity of each stage while supporting growth, and we accept the timeframes that genuine development requires.

The sustainability challenges we face are ultimately invitations to our own development. Climate change, biodiversity loss, systemic inequality, resource depletion—these are not just technical problems requiring better solutions. They are symptoms of consciousness that has not yet developed adequate capacity for the complexity, interconnection, and long-term thinking our current reality demands. Addressing these challenges externally requires addressing them internally. Outer sustainability requires inner development.

The IDG framework articulates what inner capacities we need. Ego development theory illuminates how those capacities emerge through structural transformation. Together, they provide a more complete map for the urgent work of human development in service of planetary well-being—work that is simultaneously immediate and multi-generational, individual and collective, practical and profound.

This work requires both the horizontal and the vertical, skills and structure, training and transformation, doing and being. It requires patience for developmental time while responding to urgency with appropriate action. It requires meeting people where they are while supporting them to grow. It requires working with consciousness we have while creating conditions for consciousness we're becoming.

The vertical dimension of horizontal capabilities reveals that inner development goals are not fixed achievements but evolving horizons—deepening, expanding, transforming as we ourselves deepen, expand, and transform. The journey is not toward some final destination but toward ever-greater capacity to meet life's complexity with wisdom, compassion, and appropriate action.

This is the work before us: tending the conditions for human development while addressing urgent sustainability challenges, building capacity for transformation while responding to immediate needs, growing ourselves while supporting others' growth, and ultimately, participating consciously in the evolutionary development of human consciousness itself—development that may be our species' greatest contribution to planetary well-being.

The vertical dimension has always been there, implicit in every human interaction, every organizational culture, every change initiative. Making it explicit simply enables us to work with it consciously, skillfully, and compassionately. That is the invitation and the possibility—to bring developmental awareness to the urgent, necessary, noble work of inner development in service of life.

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Appendix: Ego development stages

What is ego development theory?

Ego development theory describes qualitatively different ways of making meaning—of interpreting experience, constructing reality, and understanding self and world. These stages are not about intelligence, knowledge, or capability in any conventional sense. A brilliant scientist at an earlier stage and a modestly educated person at a later stage may be equally intelligent, but they will make fundamentally different sense of the same experiences.

Each stage represents a coherent system of meaning-making characterized by several dimensions. The subject-object structure determines what we are subject to (embedded in, identified with) versus what we can take as object (reflect on, examine, choose). The locus of authority determines where moral and epistemic authority resides—in external rules and authorities, in internalized principles, in contextual wisdom, or in the witnessing awareness itself. The time horizon spans from minutes or hours at early stages to lifetimes or generations at later stages. The scope of identification determines what is experienced as "self" or "us"—the physical body, the social role, the principled individual, the systemic node, or the witnessing consciousness.

Stages are not fixed boxes but fluid territories. Most people have a "center of gravity"—the stage from which they most consistently operate—but they can access adjacent stages depending on context, stress level, and familiarity of the situation. Development occurs through experience, particularly experiences that challenge the adequacy of our current meaning-making structure.

Stage 3 (E3): Self-protective (or Self-Oriented)⁶

The self-protective stage is characterized by an opportunistic orientation where the person primarily focuses on protecting their own interests and avoiding punishment. Self-control is limited and impulsive action is common. People at this stage often manipulate their environment to achieve immediate goals and have difficulty seeing long-term consequences of their actions.

Moral understanding is external and based on avoiding punishment rather than internalized principles. Relationships are characterized by exploitation or defense, where others are seen as either threats or resources to exploit. Time orientation is short and focused on immediate needs and desires. This stage is rare among adults in well-functioning societies but can occur under stress or in environments that reward opportunistic behavior.

Stage 4 (E4): Conformist (or Community-Oriented)

At the conformist stage, self is defined through social roles and group membership. Moral authority resides in group norms and social acceptance is central. People at this stage value fitting in, being accepted, and following established rules and expectations. They tend to see the world in black and white terms with clear categories of right and wrong.

⁶ The stage names in parentheses are from Thomas Binder.

Identity is strongly tied to group identification—family, organization, nation, or other collective entity. There is a strong desire for harmony and avoiding conflicts. Emotions are often described in simple terms and relate to group norms. The time horizon expands somewhat but remains relatively short. This stage is common in many organizational contexts where conformity and rule-following are highly valued.

Stage 5 (E5): Self-aware (or Rationalistic)

The self-aware stage marks a significant transition where people begin to see themselves as individuals separate from the group. They develop greater awareness of individual differences in attitudes, interests, and abilities. People at this stage can see that situations contain multiple possibilities and begin to understand exceptions and special circumstances.

Self-criticism emerges along with increased awareness of not always living up to social norms. Inner life becomes more articulated, though feelings are often described in relation to the group. People emphasize desire for independence and equality while still being strongly influenced by others' opinions. The time horizon expands further with ability to think in terms of goals, purposes, and explanations.

Stage 6 (E6): Conscientious (or Self-Governed)

At the conscientious stage, people have developed long-term, self-formulated principles, values and convictions. They exercise differentiated self-criticism and have developed personal responsibility. People have internalized not just rules but also the formulation of rules, choosing themselves which rules should be followed based on principles.

Self-definition occurs through chosen principles, achievements, and contributions to society. There is strong motivation for self-improvement and living up to self-chosen standards. People feel responsible for other people's wellbeing and are prepared to intervene in their interest. Emotions are differentiated and nuanced with ability to experience and articulate complex emotional states. This stage represents what many organizations and societies regard as mature adult functioning.

Stage 7 (E7): Individualistic (or Relativistic)

The individualistic stage marks the transition to post-conventional thinking. People become aware that all meaning-making is perspectival and constructed. They can see that their own and others' worldviews are partial and contextual constructions rather than objective truths.

Paradoxes and contradictions are accepted as natural aspects of reality. There is increased tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. People at this stage can hold multiple perspectives simultaneously without collapsing them into a single synthesis. Individuality is highly valued with deep respect for differences. Existential anxiety may arise as previous certainties are questioned. This stage is relatively uncommon, estimated to occur in 10-15 percent of adults in developed societies.

Stage 8 (E8): Autonomous (or Systemic)

At the autonomous stage, people integrate multiple frameworks without collapsing into relativism. They can hold principles lightly while acting decisively. There is genuine worldcentric

concern extending beyond personal and cultural boundaries. People at this stage display high tolerance for ambivalence and construct contradictions as aspects of complex life situations.

Self-identity is both fluid and stable—fluid because the person can hold multiple self-concepts lightly and recognize their contextual nature, stable because there's less investment in maintaining any particular self-image. Generativity becomes central with willingness to create meaningful life through self-determination and self-actualization. People are intimately familiar with inner conflicts and strive to master, transcend, or reconcile them. This stage is estimated to occur in fewer than 10 percent of adults.

Stage 9 (E9): Construct-aware

The construct-aware stage represents late post-conventional development where people can observe the ego itself as a constructed system. They begin to dis-identify from the ego and develop witnessing awareness—the capacity to observe consciousness operating, including the witness itself. People realize that the ego is both a representation of all life experiences and the process that processes all internal and external stimuli.

The resulting egocentrism is perceived as a limitation and obstacle to further growth. Language and thinking itself are seen as abstractions of underlying reality. People feel the meaninglessness of describing themselves adequately and question the idea of a stable personality core. This stage is very rare, estimated at less than 1 percent of the adult population.

Stage 10 (E10): Unitive

The unitive stage represents the transition to the ego-transcendent level where the central motivation is simply to be. People no longer strive for maximum self-development or for being aware, but simply for being. They want to be free from self-limiting self-definitions and excessive categorization of others.

Self-identity becomes highly fluid. The ego's function of defining and objectifying itself by distinguishing itself from others has been examined. People experience themselves and others as part of humanity's history, embedded in the flow of events. They can shift focus between different perspectives, levels, and timeframes with ease. There is less compulsion to control or make exact observations—instead there is a sense of being a witness to what happens. This stage is extremely rare and represents the end of ego development's long journey where the ego constructed through earlier stages now becomes fluid or deconstructed.