Executive Growth Along the Adult Development Curve

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This article describes how principles of adult psychological development can inform executive coaching. An adult developmental perspective is used to identify key transformational tasks of adulthood that help shape executive role functioning. The correlation of psychological competencies with leadership competencies is outlined in more detail for the roles of senior vice president and executive vice president. Coaching case material is used to further illustrate how consultants can use an adult developmental framework to better align organizational life with personal strivings for meaning and growth.

Executive coaching is a powerful developmental activity that influences both work behavior and overall personal well-being. As such, the effectiveness of coaching can be enhanced if it is based on a model of adult development that encompasses both career and personal life. In the course of coaching executives in more than 20 organizations, I have found that core concepts of adult psychological development provide such a model, informing my interventions and helping me better understand their impact.

In this article, I summarize some general principles of adult psychological development that have broad applicability to consulting work with executives. I focus on two developmental inflection points that drive and define effective functioning in senior management roles. Characteristics of the “midlife transition” (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978) are important in understanding the generic senior vice president (SVP) role while the psychological qualities associated with the transition to late midlife are important in understanding the executive vice president (EVP) role. Although these roles do not correlate perfectly with either age or level of psychological development, I try to show that there is a developmental progression during adulthood that may be productively aligned with increased and broader responsibility in the organization. (Alternatively, developmental processes may occur strictly within one role, such as the SVP, enriching and improving performance within that role.) Illustrative case materials are presented to show how psychological competencies and leadership competencies can be interrelated by developmental stage. Finally, some broader implications for organizational growth and development are discussed.

Adult Psychological Development

Development in adulthood is an ongoing dynamic process influenced by the childhood past, the adult past, and present-day experiences (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1981). Although early experience is very important in forming the personality, the psychology of the adult cannot be reduced to childhood factors. Early conflicts and deficits can be reworked or rendered less disruptive by adult experience. Experiences in adulthood have their own imperatives that offer

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opportunities for personality growth. This is especially true of landmark events, such as marriage, parenthood, illness, aging, and trauma. Work life is particularly important in providing experiences for growth and development of the personality in adulthood (Axelrod, 1999).

Erik Erikson (1950, 1958, 1968) pioneered the understanding of adult psychological development by describing how core psychological issues or tasks define the different epochs of adulthood. Erikson elaborated the psychosocial implications of Freud’s stages of childhood and extended them to adolescence and adulthood. He defined adult stages by the key psychological challenges posed, and he described the outcomes in terms of a polarity. Thus, most famously, “identity versus identity diffusion” characterized the outcomes of adolescence. “Intimacy versus isolation” described young adulthood, “generativity versus stagnation” characterized adulthood, and “integrity versus despair” was seen as the critical polarity in later adulthood.

Other theorists have added to Erikson’s contribution, focusing on the psychological dynamics of the transition to midlife and of midlife itself. Jaques (1965) argued that confronting the death anxiety associated with the midlife transition can precipitate a restructuring of the personality, with a strengthening of a sense of life’s continuity and a deepening of awareness, understanding, and self-realization. Modell (1989) noted that middle age brings with it a mourning of lost illusions, which is actually a precondition for continuing psychic aliveness. Auchincloss and Michels (1989) suggested that one of the most important psychological tasks of middle age is the vigorous and conscious reexamination of life goals. Ideals and ambitions formed under the influence of childhood fantasy must be updated in the face of new, overriding realities. Neugarten (1975) noted the growth of “interiority” during middle age and further observed that men become more receptive to affiliative and nurturant promptings and women more responsive to and less guilty about aggressive and ego-centric impulses. Overall she observed a decrease in personality complexity over time with an increased dedication to a central core of values and habit patterns. Gould (1972) agreed that in midlife, with resignation to the finite time of one’s life, there is a decrease in illusions about the self, increased self-acceptance, and for men, especially, a mellowing and warming up of the personality.

The adult development framework is a good fit with executive coaching in that it furnishes a dynamic perspective on personality growth without privileging the childhood past. While the coach might have some understanding of an executive’s early life issues and conflicts, these phenomena become the backdrop against which the all-important struggles of adulthood play out. The coach is more likely to focus on issues of the adult past and to be aware of how landmark adult developmental tasks are being negotiated by the client. The coach then adds to the mix an understanding of how career progress, success and failure, goals and values, leadership style, interpersonal relationships, communication skills, self-management skills, and so forth have affected the development of the personality in adulthood.

Coaching is guided by an understanding of how the imperatives of psychological development in adulthood play out in the here and now. Erikson’s (1950) stages, or any of the other important concepts identified by the adult developmentalists, provide broad psychological themes that can help the consultant better assess the developmental challenges facing a particular executive. The coach adds value by examining specific decisions and choice points in terms of their impact on the core psychological tasks of a particular stage. At the same time, awareness of the general thrust of development during adulthood can aid
the coach in identifying emerging capabilities that are critical for job performance and personal growth.

The next sections of this article describe how some of these psychological themes and capabilities inform leadership functioning in early and later midlife.

**The Executive Reaches Midlife**

My most common assignment as an executive coach has been to guide the development of the hard-charging middle manager. These are executives who are typically, but not always, men¹ and are usually in their mid-30s to early 40s. They are long on drive and ambition and rather short on people skills such as active listening, persuasion, consensus building, and conflict resolution. They tend to be results-oriented, project driven, and highly focused. They admit that they “do not suffer fools gladly” and have difficulty tolerating divergent opinions when the solutions to problems seem so obvious. These executives are typically abrasive, and in remedial cases, abusive. They are often “all business” and don’t show enough of their more human (and humorous) side.

In my experience, this aggressiveness comes to light as a problem, and the coaching assignment is frequently initiated on the cusp of a promotional opportunity. The organization values the executive’s contributions, but there is a sense that he is not yet ready for the broader responsibilities of SVP or managing director. In some cases, organizational sponsors may point to the kinds of so-called soft skill gaps noted above. In others, there may be a more global sense that the executive lacks polish.

I like to think of the coach’s role with these executives as helping them “ride the wave” of development from early to middle adulthood. Some are natural born surfers, but others need help spotting the wave and riding it. Understanding the normative developmental challenges of this era can help the coach guide the executive through the “transformational task” (Gould, 1993) represented by the promotion.

The anthropologist David Gilmore has described group rituals in traditional cultures that allow young men to demonstrate their fearlessness and physical prowess, thereby proving their manhood (Gilmore, 1990). In our culture, the emphasis in the mid-20s to the mid-30s is on the acquisition of technical skills and their application through activity, initiative, and assertiveness. This is typically what I would call the manager as hero role. The executive prides himself in being able to do what hasn’t been able to be done before and on doing it faster, better, and cheaper. From an organizational perspective, this provides a critical infusion of energy into the enterprise.

Levinson et al. (1978) have described a midlife transition ushered in by the awareness of aging and death or by signal experiences of limitation or failure in some sphere of functioning. (This was brought home to me during an offsite team-building activity when several executives on the cusp of this transition described very personal encounters with death and failure as critical events that made them the persons they are today.) The result of the midlife transition, as described by Axelrod (1997), Jaques (1965), Neugarten (1975), and Gould (1972), is a restructuring of the personality, with increased emphasis on awareness, insight, and affiliation. The pleasures of being, experiencing, and understanding become as important as the excitement associated with striving and reaching. Gender polarities are less sharply drawn. Growing children and aging parents help foster a sense of generational continuity as well as a deepening sense of both limitation and responsibility.

Under optimal circumstances, as executives develop, they add characteristics of

¹ Because the majority of my clients have been men, I will use the masculine pronoun in this article.
role functioning that mirror the changes of the midlife transition described above. A shift in cognitive functioning is a critical driver of this change in role functioning, but interpersonal and work style characteristics are also important. The following are some of the so-called soft skills that define effective functioning as the executive moves into an SVP level position:

- Longer time frame and increased capacity for strategic thinking
- Increased propensity for reflective thinking
- Increased ability to acknowledge, understand, and integrate the meaning of personal and career failures
- Increased tolerance of ambiguity and paradox
- Increased ability to listen to and appreciate different points of view
- Increased ability to reconcile differences based on an understanding of underlying trends and causes
- Shift from a work style based on brute strength or endurance to one based on prioritizing and leading broad efforts
- Increased ability to look broadly across the organization and identify with the larger mission.

**Case Example 1**

Jerry was a vice president in his mid-30s in a major financial services company when his coaching was initiated by his boss, Kathy. She respected Jerry’s intellectual firepower, project management skills, and his aggressive, can-do attitude, but she was concerned about his tendency to make others feel excluded, blamed, and dominated. Jerry had focused on “managing up,” but now Kathy would not feel comfortable promoting him unless he became better at fostering collaboration on a larger scale in this matrixed organization. Kathy and others had concluded that the wunderkind would have to grow up.

The results of a 360 assessment were painful for Jerry. He had to face the degree to which his hard-driving, impersonal, and abrupt style had alienated his peers and some of his direct reports. His confidence was shaken. He wondered if he should limit himself to an individual contributor role and felt adrift without his characteristically aggressive management style. A coaching plan was built around Jerry’s reaching out more actively to both peers and direct reports and taking the time needed to forge consensus. He met with participants in the 360 survey to share the key results and solicit help in changing. He learned how to listen more effectively to others and to tune in more to their needs, motivations, and constraints. His needs to be the smartest and the one who was always right were identified as problems, and he learned to tone them down.

Jerry had grown up fast in his lower-middle-class family. He felt the wound of his father’s financial setbacks during his adolescence and was intent on reaching a position of security that would protect him against anything of the kind ever happening again. In his career, he had been promoted rapidly and ahead of his peers. Not getting the SVP promotion “on schedule” was the first time Jerry had to confront failure in his work life. Simultaneously, he was being faced with setbacks in his personal life. His son had begun to show behavioral problems in school, and he and his wife were at odds over the best way to respond to these difficulties. Jerry had begun to reflect on his own childhood and his similarities to his son. He was also beginning to sort out his own values and approach to raising children.

Eventually, Jerry began to examine his close relationship with his boss, Kathy. He had become overly involved in gaining the approval of this volatile woman and embroiled in her power struggles in the organization. We began to work on differentiating his own style, values, and goals from...
Kathy’s and to stake out a more independent position in the organization. He became aware of the collateral damage caused by his need to be the boss’s favorite and learned how to rebalance the needs of his boss, peers, and subordinates. While Kathy fumed and at times berated Jerry for being disloyal, she promoted him. Jerry moved from a project management role to become the leader of a 100-person organization.

In the final phase of executive coaching, our focus was on Jerry’s leadership of his organization. He worked on bringing more of himself personally to the leadership role, demonstrating a better sense of humor about himself and more forgiveness of others’ shortcomings. He guided the leadership team toward developing a vision for the organization and working more effectively with each other. He became strongly committed to developmental activities for his entire organization and began to meld his drive for results with a commitment to meaningful change and growth.

The Executive at Late Midlife

Executive coaching assignments at the executive vice president (EVP) level bring with them a very different set of developmental challenges. In my experience, coaching at this level often means addressing issues of personal integrity and continuing commitment to work and organizational life. These executives must draw on their technical competence and history of managerial effectiveness in order to be successful; however, they must also leverage a sense of self as it has developed over time in the organizational context. Flaws or derailments in this core sense of self have profoundly adverse consequences for the executive’s all-important stewardship and modeling functions for the organization.

To be effective with executives at this level, the coach must work at a deep level of “self in the world,” as the executive confronts dilemmas of growth versus stagnation of the self. The EVP is typically concerned with meaningfulness—not only of his own career, but also of the enterprise’s overall mission. He commonly wrestles with whether he can continue to passionately commit himself to work in the organization or whether he should leave the organization altogether to pursue more personally meaningful activities. The executive is typically thinking about his legacy as well as opportunities not taken, both personal and professional. In remedial cases, the coach is confronted with alcoholism, marital dissolution, and workplace relationships poisoned by narcissism.

These coaching assignments may be given special urgency by issues of succession and retirement that are on the horizon. The executive is of great value to the organization but only if he is committed to his role and its core competencies. He needs to work out a constructive relationship with the leadership of the organization and to identify himself with the organization’s future and the development of its people.

Erikson (1950, 1958, 1968) and Gould (1972) have emphasized the centrality of a sense of authenticity and integrity in late middle age. The growth of the personality in the late-fourties and fifties is built on resilience in the face of setbacks, increased concern with the meaning of life and the process of taking stock, and greater self-acceptance. There is a deepened sense of the core self, with fewer illusions and a beginning appraisal of the career legacy. More clearly than ever before, the individual in late middle age grasps the flow of generations and feels a sense of responsibility for the generations to come. Optimally, he is both more separate and centered in the world and more deeply attached to others.

The attainment of authenticity carries with it an increased sense of what is truly important, a capacity to assess and accept what is real in both the external and internal worlds regardless of the consequences. Au-
thenticity in late middle age entails a more
penetrating sense of what is intrinsically
important over time in relationships, work,
and the life of an organization. Healthy
development at this stage carries with it a
strong sense of life as a journey and adven-
ture, complete with joy, grief, success, set-
backs, love, and death.

Healthy development in late midlife
strongly defines the core competencies of
the EVP role. Authenticity is evident in the
following key elements of role functioning:

• Ambition for the organization and its
  mission rather than for the self
• Ability to communicate an under-
  standing of the intrinsic rewards of
  work, especially the work that de-
  fines the particular organization
• Ability to take positions and chart a
  course of action based on integrity
  and a long-term perspective
• Ability to see what is most important
  in the life of the organization without
  illusion, cynicism, or despair
• Development of managerial and lead-
  ership talent.

Just as he helps the younger executive
catch the wave of midlife development, the
couch working at the EVP level helps the
executive leverage the strengths and oppor-
tunities of late middle age. Healthy, effect-
ive organizations are critically dependent
on the vital functioning of these leader-
managers, on their capacity to serve as
steward of the organization and models of
personal and career development. The abil-
ity to foster meaningful development of
managerial talent based on insight into the
dynamics of their own development and
that of people more generally is one of the
most important functions they can provide.

In my experience coaching these execu-
tives, I have often had to help them grapple
with whether they want to continue work-
ing and how they can best contribute to the
organization. This has meant helping them
find a balance between building on previ-
ous strengths and successes and trying new
things. In the course of coaching, stagna-
tion, inauthenticity, and an unwillingness to
loosen control are some of our most potent
adversaries. Measured against the criterion
of what an organization needs from an ex-
cutive at this level, the coach may be most
helpful in supporting the executive’s deci-
sion to resign the role and pursue more
fulfilling activities.

Case Example 2

As the chief operating officer (COO) of
a financial services firm, Jack was very
supportive of a coaching initiative that was
being implemented for a group of junior
executives. Wanting to lead by example
and needing a forum to discuss some of his
concerns about his career, Jack requested a
couch for himself.

After decades rising through the ranks to
become a practice leader in a large organi-
ization, Jack had left to join this relatively
small, dynamic firm. He had wanted to take
a more active hand in deal making, but
agreed first to lead the effort to improve the
organization’s infrastructure. After limited
success in that role, Jack was ready to step
down as COO and devote himself to
broader strategic management and deal
making. However, he was getting mixed
signals from Bill, the young CEO of the
firm, about how to define his new role. Jack
was frustrated with Bill, whom he felt con-
stantly changed direction and undermined
others’ autonomy.

Colleagues at all levels viewed Jack as a
man of substance, honesty, and integrity.
He was considered an independent thinker
and a caring person behind his gruff exte-
rrior. Highly valued for his decades of in-
dustry experience and breadth of contacts,
he was seen as just what the organization
needed. But people seemed to want more of
Jack and more from him, and there was an
undertone of frustration and disappoint-
ment in the 360 interviews. If only he
would decide what role he wanted to play
and commit to it!
Jack did indeed seem weary and listless. He was particularly frustrated with Bill and vented his frustration by reminding people that he did not need the money and could retire at any time. While he had taken an interest in the development of some of the junior members of the organization, he was seen as rather uninvolved with others whom he had hired. He tended to expect some of the key players in the organization to come to him and found it difficult to reach out and develop these relationships.

Executive coaching focused on what his colleagues needed from Jack and how he could best define his role. We were searching for what could energize Jack and how his knowledge, advice, and guidance could be made available to the firm. On paper, we developed a role description that would give both Jack and the organization what they needed. But a combination of a deteriorating economy and Jack’s relative inexperience in this area of investment prevented his project from getting off the ground. Jack was stuck, and the coaching seemed stalled. He no longer seemed interested in building on past strengths and successes and could not really focus on improving his interpersonal and communication skills. He had been unable to move forward into new areas of interest, and he was increasingly preoccupied with the destructive aspects of Bill’s leadership.

It became apparent to both Jack and me that the sense of stagnation he felt could be remedied only by exiting the organization. A sense of burden eventually lifted as Jack began to plan the next chapter of his life. He began to focus more on the impact he had had in his industry and how he could still draw on that with a sense of pride as a consultant. He would focus more on his board memberships and a few mentoring relationships. Most important, he would be able to devote himself more fully to some of the leisure pursuits that meant so much to him.

Epilogue

In this article, I have suggested some of the ways in which the core issues of adult development can serve as a template for evaluating executive competencies and fostering both personal and professional growth. As consultants and executive coaches, our interventions focus on leadership behavior, but we will be most effective if we incorporate an understanding of where our clients are on the curve of adult development. We need to be mindful of both what an executive is trying to accomplish in terms of his leadership and what he needs to accomplish more broadly as a person. We can be most helpful to the extent that we can bring the leadership role into alignment with the specific tasks of his stage of life, challenging him to grow in ways that are specific and personal. Our interventions with an executive also become more powerful when we understand what the organization needs from him, not only in terms of role responsibilities and hierarchical rank, but also in terms of developmental level. These are expectations that go beyond the performance of individuals to encompass the factors that lend vitality to the enterprise as a whole.

Over the course of an executive’s career, who he is as a person becomes as important as his technical and business knowledge in determining his effectiveness as a manager and leader. The executive self is in part a social role but one that is a function of stable personality characteristics, developmental factors, and self-awareness. Executives move at varying rates and with different degrees of self-awareness along the adult developmental curve. Understanding the impact of broader adult developmental factors on the managerial role can be an effective tool for the executive himself to coach and lead others.

Finally, I believe that the model of executive growth put forward in this article is particularly germane in our post-September
11th world. The terrorist attacks were a signal event that heightened the awareness not only of our mortality, but of the limits of our work lives. As consultants and coaches, we are being challenged to respond to clients who are reexamining their relationship to their work and their commitment to their organizations. They may be less willing to do high endurance work, even if it is highly rewarded, in the absence of a sense of meaning and personal growth.

In underscoring our vulnerability and limitations, the September 11 attacks represent a traumatic version of more typical life events that propel movement along the developmental curve of midlife. We are being challenged by our clients to engage their efforts to restructure their executive selves and to provide tools for the kinds of growth described in this article. Now more than ever there is a premium on mature leadership that is attuned to the imperatives of personal development. Our most senior executives play a critical role in this regard, for even during normal times their effectiveness draws on a deep understanding of the need for meaningfulness, an ability to distinguish between what is important and what isn’t over the long term, and an appreciation of the complexity and sometimes the tragedy of life’s journey.

References


