

# Assessing the Impact of Post-Conventional Leaders

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*This article provides a literature review of the state of the art in evaluating the impact of post-conventional stages of development for leaders, focusing on their impact on successful change management, on the integration of environmental concerns and practices, and on stakeholders' relationships. A synthetic review of the general theory of adult development and of its implications to leadership is provided. Then, the empirical evidence for the impact of post-conventional leaders at work is introduced and discussed. The studies here reviewed suggests that post-conventional stages of development can be a strong predictor of leadership performance, in (a) successfully leading organizational change, (b) in driving forward advanced environmentally and socially responsible initiatives, and (c) in creating strong stakeholders' relationships. Further directions for future research are suggested.*

*Keywords: leadership, ego-development, post-conventional, sustainability, change management*

## ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF POST-CONVENTIONAL LEADERS

In an age where business leaders, politicians and senior managers of public organizations need to guide collective action to address established and new global challenges, there is a desperate need for leaders capable of embracing big picture, complexity and uncertainty while ensuring that change happens in a sustainable way. Where do these capabilities come from? How can they be identified to appoint the right people in the right positions?

Developmental theory (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Loevinger, 1966; Kegan, 1980; Kohlberg, 1969; Perry, 1970; Torbert et al. 2004) has provided, over the years, evidence of how the evolution of personality and meaning-making impact the underlying assumptions that drive leaders' decisions and actions (e.g. Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Joiner & Josephs, 2007; Torbert et al., 2004; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). In this context, *meaning-making* can be defined as the intrinsic human capacity to apprehended data and integrate them in a coherent system that implicitly informs the individual's relationship to themselves, to others and to the world. Meaning-making naturally evolves through the interaction of the person with the person's social and physical environment (Kegan, 1982). As the person's meaning-making capacity matures, it opens up new ways of coping with environmental pressures and of mastering impulses, needs, emotions, sense of identity (beliefs) and cultural assumptions. Meaning-making tends to become more complex, inclusive, and expansive over time, as individuals move from *pre-conventional* (typically up to teenage years), to *conventional* (typically in the post-teenage years), to *post-conventional* stages of development (achieved only by a minority of individuals, usually after 40 years) old (Loevinger, 1976; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Kegan, 1982). Research seems to show evidence that individuals at post-conventional stages of development are

more capable to embrace cognitive, emotional and social capabilities that may help them to better perform as leaders in complex, uncertain and ambiguous scenarios.

Much of the past research focused on systematizing and validating the hypothesis of the adult development theory (Cook-Greuter 1999; Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Loevinger, 1966, 1976; Kegan, 1980, 1982; Kohlberg, 1969; Pfaffenberger et al., 2011), on recognizing and describing the traits and skills of leaders at different stages of development (Drath, 1990; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Joiner, 2008, 2011; Starr & Torbert, W. 2005; Torbert et al., 2004; Young, 2002), on ensuring the validity and reliability of the assessment methodologies to identify an individual's developmental stage (Cook-Greuter 1999; Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Loevinger, 1966; Stein & Heikkinen, 2009; Torbert & Reut, 2009), or on identifying the most effective developmental methods to support meaning-making development (Anagnostakis, 2022; Baron & Cayer, 2011; Kegan, 1982; Starr & Torbert, 2005; Torbert, 2010; Torbert et al., 2004). Nevertheless, a relatively small number of empirical studies has been carried forward, so far, to evaluate the actual performance and impact of post-conventional leaders in an organizational context (Boiral et al., 2009; Brandt et al., 2019; Brown, 2012; Bushe & Gibbs, 1990; Fisher & Torbert, 1991; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Kuhnert, 2018; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Salvetti & Nijhof, 2020).

This article, developed during my PhD studies at CIIS, suggests that post-conventional stages of development can be a strong predictor of leadership performance when it comes to: (a) successfully leading organizational change, (b) embedding environmentally and socially responsible initiatives, and (c) fostering positive relationships with employees and other stakeholders.

### Defining Post-Conventional Development

In the last century, Jane Loevinger (1976) developed one of the most influential neo-Piagetian models of adult development, by applying stage theory to *ego development* (see Pfaffenberger et al., 2011). Hy and Loevinger (1996) called *ego* the “the core of personality, individuality, the method of facing problems, opinions about oneself and problems of life, and the whole attitude towards life” (p. 4). The ego could be therefore understood as the search for coherent meanings in experience, a coherence maintained by filtering out observations which are not consistent with the current state of the ego. Loevinger and Wessler (1970) developed a projective test (Washington University Sentence Complete Test) to assess ego-development in adults. The study of the data collected through the WUSCT led Loevinger to identify different, recurring patterns of responses with similar meaning-making frameworks, which could account for identifiable stages of ego-development. Hy and Loevinger described nine stages of ego-development. Although developmental stages may change name from author to author (e.g., Cook-Greuter, 1999; Joiner, 2007; Torbert, 2004), they largely correlate in the description of developmental traits with the ones of Hy and Loevinger (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**CORRESPONDENCE OF EGO DEVELOPMENT MODELS**

Stage	Hy and Loevinger 1996	Cook-Greuter 1999	Torbert 2004	Joiner 2007
2	Impulsive	Impulsive	Impulsive	Enthusiast
3	Self-Protective	Self-Protective	Opportunist	Operator
4	Conformist	Conformist	Diplomat	Conformer
5	Self-Aware	Self-Aware	Expert	Expert
6	Conscientious	Conscientious	Achiever	Achiever
7	Individualist	Individualist	Individualist	Catalyst
8	Autonomous	Autonomous	Strategist	Co-creator
9	Integrated	Construct Aware	Alchemist	Synergist
10		Unitive	Ironist	

*Note:* Adapted from Pfaffenberger et al., 2011.

Based on the WUSCT, several authors developed further assessment methods (Pfaffenberger et al., 2011; e.g. Hewlett, 2004; Marko, 2006; Page, 2005; Sutton and Sewenson, 1983). In particular, Cook-Greuter (1999) developed a version of the WUSCT more suited to assess later stage individuals and to be administered in an organizational context and to assess leaders' development: the Leadership Development Profile (LDP) (see Torbert & Reut, 2009; Pfaffenberger et al., 2011, ch. 1). Cook-Greuter renamed Loevinger's stages (see Table 1) and described how the inherent *action logics* of each developmental stage manifest in the behaviors and skills of leaders. Notwithstanding the differences between the WUSCT and the LDP (Stein & Heikkinen, 2009), Torbert and Reut argued and evidenced that the LDP can be a reliable tool to assess leaders' development and to explain their success.

Cook-Greuter (1999) and Torbert et al. (2004) considered the stages 2 and 3 as typically pre-conventional, meaning that these stages and their traits are normal in children but are considered to be maladaptive strategies in adults. According to Miller and Cook-Greuter (1994), only about 10% of the adult population still operates at stages 2-3. Stages 4-6 are considered conventional stages, accounting for about 80% of the adult population in the Western world. Conventional individuals effectively integrate the rules and values of their social group and gradually develop a greater differentiation between what they are and what they ought to be. Stages 7-9 are considered post-conventional stages, and account for about 10% of the adult population. Post-conventional individuals continuously de-construct conventional beliefs of their group of reference, and reconstruct them in new, more complex, more liberating forms. This way they gain a great sense of individuality, a tolerance and an appreciation of differences and worldviews, and a growing a tolerance for ambiguities and complexities; here the conventional search for achievement and success may turn into a search for self-fulfillment considering ideals such as social justice or environmental sensitivity. Moreover, Cook-Greuter (1999) expanded Loevinger's taxonomy distinguishing Loevinger's stage 9 into two distinct stages: Cook-Greuter's stages 9 and 10.

Later, Joiner & Josephs (2007), having assessed via interview and WUSCT or LDP over 600 managers, renamed Loevinger's stages to better fit an organizational context (see Table 1). They argued that individuals profiling at conventional stages manifest a *Heroic* leadership style, assuming sole responsibility for setting goals, coordinating subordinates, and managing their performance. Differently, individuals profiling at the post-conventional stages manifest a *post-Heroic* leadership approach, enabling participative teams and organizations that are based on shared commitment and responsibility.

Beyond some theoretical differences and different names attributed to different stages, the descriptions of the stage-related leadership capabilities provided by Cook-Greuter (1999), Torbert et al. (2004) and Joiner & Josephs (2007) largely tend to converge. For the sake of this article:

- individuals profiling at stages 4-6 will be referred to as 'conventional'
- individuals profiling at stages 7-9 (Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Joiner & Josephs, 2007) or 7-10 (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Torbert et al., 2004) will be referred to as 'post-conventional'.

Among the empirical studies reviewed, some authors (e.g. Harris & Kuhnert, 2018; Kuhnert, 2008; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009) profiled leaders based on the Leadership Development Levels (LDL), a developmental stage taxonomy referring to the stages proposed by Robert Kegan (1982) in his constructivist-developmental theory. Kegan stage 2 roughly corresponds to Cook-Greuter (1999) stage 3, Kegan stage 3 to Cook-Greuter stages 4-5, Kegan stage 4 to Cook-Greuter stage 6-8, Kegan stage 5 to Cook-Greuter stages 9-10. In this article, individuals profiling a LDL and Kegan stage 5 will be referred to as post-conventional.

### **Empirical Evidence for the Impact of Post-Conventional Leaders**

The research reviewed in this article adopts a mix of different methodologies to correlate leaders' stage of development and performance. These methods involve, on one hand, assessing the developmental stage of individual leaders, on the other, measuring leadership performance in relation to significant organizational metrics. The reviewed studies assess developmental stages through:

- The use of dedicated psychometrics such as the WUSCT or the LDP (Bushe & Gibbs, 1990; Rooke & Torbert, 1998).

- In-depth interviews (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Kuhnert, 2018; Salvetti & Nijhof, 2020; Spano, 2015; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009), often involving the assessment of the Leadership Development Level (Lewis 1987; Kegan, 1982; Kuhnert & Kegan, 1994); this methodology has demonstrated convergence with the data collected through the WUSCT and LDP, in particular for individuals at conventional stages (see Pfaffenberger et al., 2011, p.15 ff.).
- A Mix of psychometrics (WUSCT or LDP) and interviews (Brandt et al., 2019; Boiral et al., 2009; Brown, 2012; Fisher & Torbert, 1991; Merron, Fisher, & Torbert, 1987).
- The analysis of the subject's biography and autobiographical texts (Torbert (1989).

The ways adopted to evaluate leadership performance and impact involve:

- The success in change management initiatives led by the subjects assessed (Brandt et al. 2019; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Torbert, 1989).
- The successful adoption of advanced environmental and socially responsible initiatives in the organization led by the subject (Boiral et al., 2009; Salvetti & Nijhof, 2020).
- The subject's impact on direct relationships through 360-feedback—involving different raters such as line managers, peers, direct reports and other relevant stakeholders—(Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Kuhnert, 2018; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009).

A few of the studies reviewed (Brown, 2012; Bushe & Gibbs, 1990; Fisher & Torbert, 1991; Merron, Fisher & Torbert, 1987) suggested indirect correlations between leaders' developmental stage and leadership performance by assuming that the competencies demonstrated by individual leaders can be used as predictors of their potential at work. Although these studies did not directly assess impact on objective organizational measures, they are here reviewed because their results provided valuable insights into the causal relationships between leadership competencies and leadership impact.

### **Impact of Post-Conventional Leaders on Change Management**

In a growingly dynamic and unpredictable business environment, the capacity of leaders to successfully lead organizations through complex changes is an increasingly important component of the skills of senior leaders and top managers. Are post-conventional leaders better equipped to lead organizations through change and transformation? Different authors have tried to answer this question.

Fisher, Merron, and Torbert (1987) hypothesized that the reason why only few organizations reach more complex organizational development stages may be that only few senior managers develop at later stages. The authors assessed through the WUSCT 49 MBA alumni and students, holding full-time positions in a different organization, and found that managers at later developmental stages were more likely to redefine problems than to accept them as presented on an in-basket assessment exercise. They evidenced that: Loevinger (1976) stage 6 and 7 individuals seemed to treat problems as symptoms of a deeper underlying causes, rather than simply accepting in their current frame; and (b) that individuals profiling at Loevinger stages 7 and 8 showed the largest increase in percentage of collaborative actions. While these data seemed to support the thesis of an increasing correlation between later development stages and leadership performance in addressing complex managerial decisions, such as the ones involved in managing change, the study only lacked a way to directly correlate in-basket performance to change management impact.

Fisher & Torbert (1991) carried similar inherent limitations. The authors delivered semi-structured interviews to 17 managers and assessed them through the WUSCT. Interviewees were asked questions about their position, about cases where they had been effective and less effective as leaders, and about their experience after the graduate study. The interviews were separated into two categories manifesting: pre-Strategists (Loevinger's stages 5-6) and Strategists themes (Loevinger's stages 7-8). The interview transcripts were analyzed, and the authors evidenced that no themes that were common among the Strategists were also common among the pre-Strategist, and vice versa. The study highlighted contrasting approaches between the two groups and suggested that Strategists were more effective in (a) leading subordinates, (b) dealing with superiors and (c) taking forward action initiatives in ways that create impact and people engagement. This study supports the hypothesis of a strong correlation between post-

conventional leader development and impact on stakeholder relationships and organizational change, even though the method used did not provide an objective organizational measure for impact.

Searching for specific case studies to validate to correlate leaders' development stage and actual decisions, behaviors and impact, Torbert (1989) analyzed the life history of Pope John XXIII and the moderation style adopted in a meeting by the leader of a small organization assessed as LDP *Magician* (stage 9, later called Alchemist, in Torbert, 2004; see Table 1). Torbert described the Magician stage as characterized by a growing disintegration of the ego-identity (sometimes even sparked by near-death experiences), an interest in participating in wider historical or spiritual transformations, the capacity to create mythical events that reframe situations. Torbert's Magician was also defined by a unique capacity to remain anchored in an inclusive present, to see both light and dark, order and mess in the current situation, hence blending opposite blends opposites that could creating positive-sum games. There rare individuals could exercise their attention by researching an interplay of intuition, thought, action, and effects on the outside world, often treating time and events as analogical and metaphorical. According to Torbert both stories accounted for in his study evidenced how the two late-stage leaders: (a) appeared to be creating the conditions for second-order transformations, development, and integrative awareness; (b) leveraged on the role of analogical thinking in supporting intentional second-order transformation; and (c) generated a second-order transformation because assuming it would be both conducive of the development of members and the congruence of the organization with its mission. Based on his analysis, Torbert argued that only late-stage leaders are likely to successfully support a second-order organizational change by encouraging individuals and groups to test the frames and reframe them. By mixing a hermeneutical approach with a third person perspective informed by Torbert's developmental model, this analysis of the case of Pope John XXIII and on his impact on the change of the Catholic Church was one of the chronologically first studies to provide some, although limited, empirical evidence of a direct correlation between post-conventional development of the leader of a significantly large organizational and his capacity to successfully promote and manage change in the same organization.

Further data to support this thesis was later collected by Rooke & Torbert's (1998) analysis of ten longitudinal change management programs led by CEOs whose developmental stages were assessed through the Leadership Development Profile (LDP) (see Table 3). Among the ten CEOs, five profiled as Strategist and five as pre-Strategist. The authors observed the ten organizations as they tried to drive forward transformations codified according to an eight-stage model of organizational development: (a) Conception, (b) Investments, (c) Incorporation, (d) Experiments, (e) Systematic Productivity, (f) Collaborative Inquiry, (g) Foundational Community, (h) Liberating Disciplines. The five Strategist CEOs led, in total, 15 successful organizational stages transitions (with single organizations transitioning more than one stage) and became industry leaders according to several business indexes. Three of the organizations not led by Strategist CEOs did not develop, lost personnel, industry standing, and financial resources. In two cases pre-Strategists CEOs led successful organizational transformations, and here the analysis showed that they treated as advisors and allies their consultant and one or more team members profiled at the Strategist. The authors found that the combined Action Logic scores of CEO and consultant accounted for 59% of the variance in whether an organization was successfully transformed. This study brings significant evidence to support a strong correlation between the post-conventional development stage of individuals with the role to lead measurable organizational change and the success of their change initiatives.

A study by Bushe & Gibbs (1990) shed some light on why post-conventional development may be a strong predictor of organizational development (OD) skills. Their study involved 64 employees of a large manufacturing division of a Fortune 100 company. The group attended a 20-days OD skills training program. Each participant's OD skills were rated, before and after the program, by 2 peers, and after the program by the two trainers. Before the training they were administered both the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the WUSCT, and the WUSCT was administered again 6 months after the program. The results evidenced that MBTI's *Intuition* dimension was a significant predictor of trainers rating (but not of peers), and that WUSCT stage was a significant predictor of peers and, even more, trainers rating. Later stages of development significantly predicted competencies like: clarity under stress, enables others,

gains peer respect, is able to get to yes, learns quickly. The reliability of the study is somehow moderated by the fact that the WUSCT raters were self-trained and the inter-rater agreement averages between 65% (for the men) and 67% (for women), which is below the average performance of trained scorers; only the study adopted indirect measures by assessing only the participants skills and not their successful application on change management initiatives. Nevertheless, the evidence from this study may shed additional light on why post-conventional leaders and consultants can operate as more effective change agents, hence contributing to support the hypothesis of a strong correlation between late-stage development and leadership performance in organizational transformation.

Like Bushe & Gibbs (1990), Brown (2012) inquired how post-conventional leaders manage complex change. The author inquired how 32 leaders and change agents engaged in sustainability initiatives. The 32 leaders were profiled through the WUSCT, and their behaviors were reported through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data showed that 13 late-stage leaders (six Strategists, five Alchemists, two Ironists) (Torbert, 2004) appeared to (a) design change from a deep inner foundation, (b) access powerful internal resources and theories to distil and evolve the design, and to (c) adaptively manage the design.

While adopting only indirect measures, Brown's study supported the hypothesis of a strong correlation between post-conventional leadership and their performance in organizational change performance by describing the distinctive competencies late-stage leaders apply to support and drive organizational transformation.

More recently, also Brandt et al. (2019) collected evidence for how post-conventional leadership principles are expressed in a change process. The authors analyzed the case study of an international biotech plant in a small town in Sweden. The plant had a long history and significant track record in quality improvement and change management. The authors administered the Leadership Agility 360 (Joiner & Josephs, 2007) to the plant leader, who scored at Catalysis (analogous to Loevinger stage 7). Researchers carried forward 19 interviews and 4 workshops with a sample of managerial levels and subordinates. Results evidenced two main themes and six related sub-themes that seemed to explain the positive impact of leadership on the 10-years long change process:

- The plant leader used explorative work methods by piloting and learning by doing and by searching for a holistic understanding.
- The plant leader left his leadership footprints by integrating the emotional aspects of leadership, leading as facilitator, increasing the demands on employees, and providing them with less support.

The exercise of these competencies and this leadership style largely supported synergies, empowerment, and a co-creative environment among employees. Interestingly, while the study evidenced that most employees thrived and grew with the possibilities provided by the leader's style, it also highlights that some staff members experienced a lack of support and clear directions given the explorative and facilitative methods embedded by the plant leader. Brandt et al. supported the hypothesis that postconventional leaders are more capable to generate positive impact in managing change, but also evidenced that their leadership style can be more difficult to deal with for employees less accustomed to embedding a proactive relationship with change and to dealing with uncertainty. In doing so, it asked the question: are post-conventional leaders always more effective in driving organizational change, independently from the developmental stage of the employees they lead? None of the studies reviewed tackled this question directly.

The empirical studies collected so far provide promising evidence of a strong correlation between post-conventional development stage in leaders and their performance in generating impactful organizational change. The number of longitudinal studies and case studies collected (Brandt et al., 2019; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Torbert, 1989) is still small, and further research may be required to acquire further evidence in support of the thesis. Moreover, an inherent risk in the methodologies adopted in these studies is that, emphasizing the developmental stage of top leaders, they may tend to overestimate its influence on successful change initiatives. On the contrary, they may under-estimate the impact of other variables that may equally influence change outcomes, such as, for example, the developmental stage of the employees, specific elements of the organizational culture, the role of shareholders or of wider market conditions or

the dynamics activated by organizational structure and processes. From this perspective, the design and execution of further longitudinal studies assessing the influence also of non-leader related variables may further validate the correlational links between postconventional development in leaders and their impact in managing organizational change initiatives that generate lasting results.

Finally, the indirect studies reviewed (Brandt et al., 2019; Brown, 2012; Bushe & Gibbs, 1990; Fisher, Merron & Torbert, 1987; Fisher & Torbert, 1991), by identifying specific post-conventional capabilities without directly correlating them to objective cases of successful change, provided valuable insights to explain how post-conventional leaders manage change initiatives more successfully than conventional leaders. Also in this case, additional studies may be needed to validate these results by correlating the post-conventional organizational development competencies identified with their direct impact on organizational transformations.

### **Impact of Post-Conventional Leaders on Environmentally and Socially Responsibility Initiatives**

Notwithstanding the growing interest in sustainability and environmentally friendly corporate strategies, the number of studies directly correlating post-conventional development to advanced environmental or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives are limited. Boiral et al. (2009) provided a theoretical model for how leaders' action logics (Torbert, 2004) might influence the meaning they give to corporate greening and environmental issues, arguing for the importance of post-conventional stages of development for the recognition of relevance of environmental issues and for the effective management of complex environmental programs. Boiral et al. (2009) argued that each LDP stage might translate into a specific approach to environmental policies. According to them, leaders at pre-conventional stages, such as Opportunist (about 5% of the managerial population), generally demonstrate little sensitivity to environmental issues, except when they represent a threat or foreseeable gain for the manager; they therefore tend to resist demands and pressure from stakeholders and view the environment more or less as a collection of resources to exploit; this might translate in sporadic and short-term actions for sustainability. Leaders at conventional stages might experience an instrumental concern relationship with environmental issues: Diplomats (12% of the managerial population), driven by group norms and need for social approval, might support environmental policies to keep up appearances or to follow a trend in established social conventions, or to soothe conflicts in relations with stakeholders; Experts (about 38 % of the managerial population), driven by rationality and need to improve efficiency, might integrate environmental issues into organizational objectives and procedures to respond to market concerns about ecological issues, even though this may happen in a tension with their concern for performance. Achievers (about 30 % of the managerial population), driven by goals, pragmatism and group performance, might actually integrate environmental issues into organizational objectives and procedures to respond to market concerns about ecological issues, seeing them as leverage to improve business performance. It is only at post-conventional stages of development that environmental concerns might be seen as an end in themselves, not in a contradiction, but in an actual synergy, with the organization's goals. Individualists (about 10 % of the managers), by taking critical distance and valuing creative and divergent thinking, might demonstrate an inclination to develop original and creative environmental solutions and to question preconceived notions, while adopting a more systemic view of the issues. Strategist (about 4% of the managerial population), seeking individual and organizational transformation in the context of a systemic worldview, might be more inclined to propose and shape pro-environmental visions and cultures, and to embed a more proactive approach to anticipate long-term trends; they might also integrate in a systemic approach the economic, social and environmental aspects that relate to environmental issues. Alchemist (just 1 % of the managerial population), seeking comprehensive transformations of organization and society that encompass material, spiritual and societal issues, might re-center the organization's mission and vocation toward a more social and environmental outlook and demonstrate an activist commitment towards environmental and social causes.

The theoretical model introduced in Boiral et al. (2009) was later empirically tested by Boiral et al. (2014) through a collection of case 15 studies, six from green and nine from passive Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (<300 employees) in Canada, in the manufacturing sector. Green SMEs were identified

among businesses where the top manager was actively committed to promoting environmental initiatives inside the organization, and SMEs among those with top managers who were not actively committed to or particularly concerned by environmental issues. Top managers, managers and employees of the firms were interviewed to evaluate the strength of their top management commitment to environmental issues. Data collection involved (a) the gathering of relevant documents, (b) interviews with top managers, (c) interviews with other managers and employees, (d) completion of the LDP for the top managers, and (e) debriefing interviews with top managers. The level of the company's environmental commitment was assessed in a five-rates scale from 'Very Low' to 'Very High' and was then compared with the top managers' LDPs. The results evidenced that most environmental management practices were run by managers scored at post-conventional stages, while the organizations that demonstrated less sustainable practices were all run by managers at conventional stages (see Figure 1). Boiral et al. (2014) suggested that, as predicted by the developmental theory, post-conventional managers demonstrated a high to very high commitment towards environmental initiatives, and promoted more innovative environmental measures and participative approaches compared to conventional managers. Moreover, their environmental commitment was more driven by personal values and general ethical concerns, and not used merely as an instrument to drive business profit or growth. On the contrary, Achiever managers demonstrated involvement with environmental initiatives only insofar as these were coherent with the corporate strategy and not seen as a threat to financial performance. Expert stage managers demonstrated general skepticism and disinterest about environmental commitment in their role. One Diplomat manager appeared to be the most passive because of the uncertainties, economic impacts and conflicting elements involved. Based on these results, the authors suggested a strong correlation between later stage development of top managers and environmental commitment and performance of their businesses, with post-conventional leaders embracing green policies as valuable in themselves, not only if not contradictory with the business wider economic interests. Interestingly, the authors evidenced that already top managers at the Achiever may effectively embed green policies, even though only as a strategic leverage for company performance. Even though limited in its scope (15 case studies), this research clearly supports the thesis of a strong correlation between leaders' post-conventional development and their interest in and capacity of adopting environmental commitments, and relating developmental stage and environmental leadership approach, and provided important theoretical insights about the reasons for this strong correlation on the base of the adult development theory.

The results from Boiral et al. (2014), were later corroborated by Salvetti and Nijhof (2020), whose data brought further evidence of a strong correlation between leaders' post-conventional action logics and their attention to CSR initiatives. Their study involved nine local business leaders in the ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh. The business leaders underwent in-depth interviews, and further observations. Company reports were analyzed to determine the level CSR behaviors, scaled in a seven-modes model displaying characteristic approaches:

- Compliant: the leader only complies with minimum mandatory national standards.
- Philanthropic: the leader follows what competitors do in terms of CSR and make charitable donations.
- Efficient: the leader applies cost-saving approaches to CSR activities, demonstrating preference for proven technological approaches.
- Strategic-goals oriented: the leader starts mainstreaming CSR within the organization.
- Engaging: the leader supports the Government and other institutions in designing and implementing new initiatives, pursuing smart and innovative initiatives.
- Transformative: the leader conceives and applies new business strategies and models to integrate CSR within the company and to contribute to the welfare of society.

The seven behavioral postures also highlighted the motivation on which base CSR behaviors were displayed. The study highlighted four relevant patterns: (a) later action logics were needed to engage in more advanced stages of CSR practices; (b) at Achiever action logic leaders started moving towards more advanced stages of CSR behaviors; (c) earlier action logics could not induce advanced stages of CSR behaviors; (d) business leaders with later action logics could still apply practices of the full range of CSR



modes. It is worth noting that the strength of this study was partially undermined by the methodology applied to evaluate leaders' action logics. In fact, individuals were not assessed through the analysis of recorded interviews, not through a psychometric assessment like the WUSCT or the LDP. Moreover, the authors did not mention if they had verified inter-scoring reliability for their evaluations. Notwithstanding its limitations, the patterns identified by Salvetti and Nijhof brought further evidence of a positive correlation between post-conventional development and the integration of more advanced CSR concerns and behaviors in leaders.

Boiral et al. (2014) and Salvetti and Nijhof (2020) collected interesting data to validate the claim of a strong correlation between post-conventional action logics and leadership impact when it comes to integrating environmental and social concerns in business practices and strategies. It is possible to hypothesize that this correlation is explained not only with more developed capabilities later-stage leaders, but also with the capacity of post-conventional leaders to see environment and society as ends in themselves, not only as means for protecting the brand from the risks associated with irresponsible policies. Although Boiral et al. (2014) and Salvetti and Nijhof (2020) highlighted how environmental and CSR concerns start manifesting with an Achiever action logic, the last of the conventional stages, this can be explained with the fact that social and environmental concerns have entered more and more the cultural space of conventional thinking, and Achiever leaders demonstrate awareness of the potential impact on the business reputation and performance of failing to integrate these concerns.

While the number of studies exploring the correlation between post-conventional leadership and green CSR practices is still too limited to draw definitive conclusions, Boiral et al. (2014) and Salvetti and Nijhof (2020) outline an encouraging direction for future studies to test the correlation between the late-stage development of senior leaders and the socio-environmental concerns and commitments of the organizations that they lead. Research designs including the developmental profiling of leaders, in-depth interviews about their philosophy and beliefs in approaching sustainability initiatives, and the collection of case studies measuring the maturity level of the green and CSR initiatives adopted by their organizations might provide further first-, second- and third-person evidence to support the claim.

### **The Impact of Post-Conventional Leaders on Employee Relationships**

Measuring the impact of leadership style on the relationships with employees and stakeholders is a critical component for evaluating how post-conventional leaders influence work relationships and climate. Harris and Kuhnert (2008), correlated the developmental stage of 74 executives and their scores through a 360-degree feedback (Hagberg Consulting Group, 2002a) to identify the influence of leaders' development on their performance. Leaders' developmental stage was assessed through interviews aiming to identify their Leadership Development Level (LDL) (Eigel and Kuhnert, 2005; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). This assessment, based on Kegan's (1982) model of adult development, takes into consideration the relationship between two internal structures within the individual: the *subject* and the *object*.

The subject is the fundamental process accounting for how individuals organize and make sense of their experience; the object is the content of the experience organized by the specific shapes that the subject takes at each developmental stage. As the subject matures, also their object changes: what was previously the subject at a certain developmental stage becomes the object of a new emerging subject in the following stage. Therefore, if at stage two personal goals and agenda (subject) ruled immediate needs and feelings (object), in stage three interpersonal connections (subject) rule personal goals and agendas (object). Similarly, in stage four, personal standards and value systems (subject) rule interpersonal connection (object), and in stage five openness and paradox (subject) rule personal standards and value systems (subject). Harris and Kuhnert's participants were tested with the subject-object interview (Lahey et al., 1988) to assess the leaders' LDL, which was done with an inter-rater reliability of 91%. Subsequently, each participant underwent a 360° Multi-Rater Feedback Assessment (Hagberg Consulting Group, 2002) and the Personality and Leadership Profile (PLP), a self-report measure of personality traits based on 342 self-referent statements rated with a 4-point Likert scale (Hagberg Consulting Group, 2002b). Authors found significant differences with a large effect between less effective leaders (LDL 2 and LDL 3, corresponding to Loevinger levels 3-5) and more effective leaders (LDL 4 and LDL 5, corresponding to Loevinger levels

6-9) across all eight leadership competencies of the feedback 360 model. The small sample caused authors to dichotomize LDL profiles as either LDL 2/3s or LDL 4/5s, when the constructive-developmental theory presupposes a continuum trajectory of development. Also, LDL 4 includes one of the Hy and Loewinger's (1996) stages that Cook-Greuter (1999) considers conventional (level 6) and three that she considers post-conventional (levels 7-9); this makes the results of Harris and Kuhnert's study largely by not entirely comparable fitting with Cook-Greuter's (1999) and Torbert's (2004) definition of post-conventional development in the way this is scored, for example, through the LDP. Nevertheless, Harris and Kuhnert evidenced how the LDL was a strong predictor of leadership performance according to the different clusters of raters, arguing for the predictive ability of LDL above and beyond personality dimensions. Their research brought positive evidence for later-stage development to be a strong predictor of effectiveness in several leadership competencies, such as (a) managing performance, (b) cultivating and retaining talent, (c) inspiring commitment, and (d) catalyzing teams, and even more (e) leading change, (f) creating a compelling vision, and (g) personal grounding. Additionally, it suggested that personality and LDL are not redundant, supporting the case for the application of the constructive-developmental theory as a framework for understanding a unique aspect of leadership and of its impact.

Strang and Kuhnert (2009) brought forward an empirical investigation of a leader's developmental stage as a predictor of 360-degree leader performance ratings. Leadership Developmental Level was found to predict performance ratings from all rater sources (superiors, peers, and subordinates). In this study, the predictive ability of LDL was compared to that of the Big Five in a model of 360-degree leader performance ratings. As an outcome, LDL was found to account for a unique component of the variance in leadership performance as rated by peers and subordinates, beyond that which can be accounted for by the Big Five model. Similar to Harris and Kuhnert (2008), Strang and Kuhnert (2009) identified a positive correlation between later-stage development and leadership performance in 360 feedback, hence supporting the hypothesis of late stage development as a significant performance and impact predictor.

Kuhnert (2018) added an interesting gender-related perspective to the study of the correlation between LDL and leadership performance measured via multi-rater feedback. The study collected data from 67 senior executives (74 males and 20 females) involved in an executive development program. Each one participated in a semi-structured interview conducted by a trained Psychologist to determine his/her LDL. Two trained Psychologists reviewed the transcripts, with 93% agreement. Afterwards, the LDL of participants was correlated with the scores of their 360-degree feedback as a measure of leadership performance. LDL emerged as a significant predictor of male leaders' 360 feedback ratings, but not of female leaders' performance ratings. Kuhnert identified the source of this discrepancy in the gender distinction in *Interpersonal Connection Style* at LDL 3; here the trait *separateness* more common in men positively influenced the raters, while the trait *connectedness* more common in women influenced them negatively. Overall, the study seemed to support the hypothesis of a strong correlation between later-stage leadership and 360 feedback scores as a measure of effective stakeholders relationships.

In summary, the correlation studies between Leadership Development Levels (LDL) and 360 feedback scores (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Kuhnert, 2018; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009) supports the hypothesis of later-stage development to be a strong predictor of leadership performance in managing the relationships with key stakeholders, even though the use of the LDL as an assessment methodology reduces the possibility to identify a clear distinction between conventional and postconventional development for the individuals profiling at LDL level 4. More studies may be needed to further isolate leaders profiling at WUSCT or LDP postconventional stages (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Torbert, 2004) and evaluate the impact of their developmental stage on their stakeholders relationships, measured through methods such as 360 feedback, upward feedback, and employees' interviews.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article I provided a literature review of the empirical research analyzing the impact of individual leaders that profile at post-conventional stages of development on their organizations. The evidence

collected so far seemed to clearly suggest that post-conventional development is a predictor of leadership performance and organizational impact when it comes to:

- Successfully leading organizational development, change and transformation (Brandt et al. 2019; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Torbert, 1989).
- Integrating more advanced environmentally and socially responsible concerns and initiatives in managerial decisions and organizational practices (Boiral et al., 2009; Salvetti & Nijhof, 2020).
- Establishing and growing positive relationships between the leaders and their key stakeholders (line managers, peers, direct reports and others) (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Kuhnert, 2018; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009) and demonstrating strong capabilities in skills such as managing performance, growing and retaining talent, inspiring commitment, catalyzing teams, leading change, creating a compelling vision, and being personally grounded.

These conclusions were also supported by those studies that defined significant correlations between late-developmental stages of individual leaders and the unique capabilities and skills they seem to be demonstrating, compared to earlier stage leaders specifically in the field of organizational change. Post-conventional leaders, in fact, seem to generate positive impact by

- not taking problems at face value but as symptoms of underlying causes, (Fisher, Merron & Torbert, 1987),
- fostering collaborative action (Fisher, Merron & Torbert, 1987),
- enabling others (Bushe & Gibbs, 1990) and lead as facilitator while increasing demands on employees (Brandt et al., 2019),
- leveraging on deep, intuitive, inner resources and integrative multi-leveled awareness to design change (Brandt et al., 2019; Brown, 2012),
- creating compelling visions (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008) and conditions for change (Torbert, 1989),
- adaptively manage change implementation (Brown, 2012) through pilots, tests, and learning by doing (Brandt et al., 2019),
- remaining grounded (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008) and clear under stress (Bushe & Gibbs, 1990).

One of the most common limitations of the available research is that it has largely been based on finding correlations between leaders' developmental stages and behaviors, on one hand, and organizational impact, on the other. Few studies differentially explore the predictive value of variables, such as, for example, personality differences (e.g. Bushe & Gibbs, 1990; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009), to isolate the specific role of the leader's developmental stage in relation to leadership performance and organizational impact. Kuhnert (2018), found that stakeholders ratings in 360 Feedback scores may be influenced by the gender of the rated leader, at least when the leader profiles at a conventional developmental stage. Is it possible that other variables manifest a similar effect? Findings such as the one from Kuhnert (2018) stimulate researchers to include a differential approach to inquiry the role of other demographic factors (such as age, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, study background etc.) when leadership impact is measured through stakeholders' feedback.

Also, wider impersonal organizational conditions may sometimes influence stakeholders' ratings during 360 feedback exercises, such as, for example, general organizational climate and levels of employee engagement, organizational culture, market conditions, stress levels, and, even more, the employees' developmental stage. All these variables could play a significant role in influencing not only 360 feedback, but the general impact that post-conventional leaders may have in their roles. Future studies might need to implement methodologies capable of more clearly isolating the predictive value of post-conventional development from other factors to moderate the risk of overestimating the influence of leaders' development.

Finally, the limited number of empirical studies focused on assessing the impact of post-conventional leaders encourages researchers to further this line of empirical inquiry by applying a multi-methodological research design. Addressing longitudinal case studies with mixed methods including first-person, third person and a hermeneutical approach might contribute to further explain what life-changing experiences

may contribute to post-conventional development for a minority of leaders, what unique capabilities they apply in different scenarios, and how they directly contribute to generating long-term, sustainable, and systemic change. Collecting further evidence for how these leaders operate in challenging contexts might not only validate the hypothesis of developmental theory, but might, even more, create a compelling business case for MBA schools, public organizations, and corporations to select, appoint and develop post-conventional leaders in key positions, and to contribute to shape, in this way, more change-ready, sustainable, and people-oriented organizations.

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