



Spiral Dynamics

Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change

Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan | Wiley-Blackwell © 2005

Management consultants Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan based this 1996 study on potentially game-changing work that professor Clare Graves completed 30 years earlier. The authors describe a series of spirals as the basic construct in the life cycle of a person, organization or nation. All the spirals or levels in this “spiral dynamic” system can be present simultaneously, and they are infinite – they place no limit on human or group development. Anyone who has worked with other people will find that spiral’s levels look familiar and make sense. A less useful book might end by describing the levels and their values or “memes,” but here, the authors supply dozens of examples and a detailed blueprint for putting knowledge of the levels into practice to help people and groups change. While smart and applicable, the book is difficult to parse: It is stylistically flawed, the editing is shaky and the structure is baffling. After reading the introduction and chapter 1, readers should skip to section 3 – a rich, interesting description of each level on the spiral. After this, *getAbstract* finds, reading chapters 2 to 8 – which cover the actual application of spiral dynamics – will be far more rewarding.

Take-Aways

- People, societies and cultures move through spiral-shaped levels – or value systems – based on their “life conditions,” experiences and challenges.
- From the basic survival level, people progress through six tier-one levels covering mysticism, order and duty, status and materialism, and, finally, social welfare.
- At the two second-tier levels, people achieve full individual potential and groups unify.
- Levels – identified by colors and their intellectual “meme” – do not define “types of people” but rather the “way people think about things.”
- For proper development, move up the spiral rung-by-rung; don’t skip any stages. Levels overlap, and within them, several layers can affect each person, group or culture.

- Each level has “entering, peak and exiting phases.” Try not to regress or get stuck.
- People or groups can respond only to change agents that are appropriate for their current circumstances or levels.
- For lasting change, you need the right conditions and processes.
- No final destination exists. When you finish a level, you begin the quest for the next one.
- You cannot start a change journey until you understand where on the spiral you are now.

Summary

A Universal Framework

The “spiral dynamics” (SD) system is a construct for understanding eight interrelated stages or levels of human and cultural maturity. A different color represents each level, or cultural value, and each one has its own priorities, beliefs and worldviews. People, societies and cultures move through these value-system levels based on their “life conditions,” experiences and challenges. When the condition of a person, organization, culture or nation changes, that transition challenges core values and ideas. Problems can arise that people or groups can’t solve in their current systems, so they seek alternatives and progress to higher, more complex levels on the spiral.

“I am proposing that the psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, emergent, oscillating, spiraling process marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems as man’s existential problems change.” (Clare Graves)

Movement on the spiral goes step-by-step, transitioning through the “entering, peak and exiting” stages of overlapping levels, not skipping any levels. Ideally, this evolution occurs over time: A person or group will leave stages where the prior level still dominates and gradually shift upward, as a new, higher level appears on the horizon. Problems can arise when this progress is blocked.

“You cannot change people, but people change, and you may facilitate the process or stand in its way.”

The spiral can be a very useful tool for understanding and aiding others, and for accelerating change. But, to use it, you must recognize the person or group’s current level and tailor your change initiatives to it. Rarely does influence come from one level alone. Generally, several layers – or sets of values or ideations, called “memes” – influence each person or group. Levels do not define types of people, but rather “how people think about things.”

“Beware of making the same mistake 99% of change agents do – applying the techniques of change that work on you to your clients. Step through the looking glass and try the Spiral instead.”

You can't force a solution just because it reflects your level or might work brilliantly elsewhere. For example, an attempt to build an open-market economy in a nation emerging from decades of authoritarian rule usually encounters problems. That country first needs a period of gradual liberalization and dawning personal freedom to encourage individualism and budding entrepreneurialism.

“Political, technological, economic and social forces are spawning wind shears and tornadoes over the global marketplace.”

This approach may sound simple, but properly recognizing a person or group's present level is hard and so is resisting the leadership temptation to push for larger, less gradual leaps. Properly implemented, SD has tremendous power and change-management applicability as shown in many instances, including managing corporate change. Its application is nearly universal.

The Colors: Levels and Values

The six “Tier One” levels of human development are color-coded and “meme-based” ways to reflect historic or individual cultural maturity. They are:

1. **“Beige”** – At this “semi-Stone Age” level, people act on instinct, focusing day-by-day on survival. They form groups, not for social reasons but to hunt and gather and to gain protection. Babies move out of this spiral quickly, as do most primitive cultures. Older people might regress to beige from higher levels, for example, in Alzheimer's disease. Work with beige groups via the senses (such as taste, touch, sight). Less than 0.1% of the global population is beige; they hold only about .01% of world political power.
2. **“Purple”** – Driven by a desire to influence their surroundings and improve their conditions, people at this stage form more complex associations, moving beyond families and clans into tribes. They are ritualistic, mystic, animistic ancestor-worshippers. Obedient and spiritual, they adhere to group rites, kinship, beliefs and taboos. To change people or groups at this level, respect their mores, customs, signs and symbols. For example, a sports team (with members who are otherwise at higher levels) might exhibit purple traits. Ignoring or disrespecting their superstitions might spark a negative reaction. Significant numbers of people still live in tribes and clans; about 10% of the world is purple, representing roughly 1% of the political power.
3. **“Red”** – Purple gives way to red when populations begin to realize their superstitions are unfounded and their rituals pointless. When groups challenge “exploitative” red rulers' authority, those rulers grow more oppressive, which accelerates change. Once group harmony begins to erode, a power vacuum arises. “Strongmen” emerge as red begins to dominate. In the dog-eat-dog red world, despots rule “empires,” and power matters most. People worry about getting their share, believe in survival of the fittest and think short-term. People, groups and cultures are authoritarian, rigid, hierarchical, manipulative and brutal, with no empathy. For success in red cultures, emphasize respect and saving face. They will view group-bonding exercises with hostility. Tell red “what's in it for them”; offer order and higher purpose amid

their near-anarchy. About 20% of people are red and they hold some 5% of world power. Perilous red cultures are too random for most people.

4. **“Blue”** – The desire for order and purpose ushers in the early stages of the blue level, which represents structure, predictability, patriotism and self-sacrifice for a larger cause. Blue is still strict, authoritarian and top-down, but the leaders are more paternalistic than self-aggrandizing. To facilitate change, introduce the benefits of individual achievement and reward. Respect tradition. Don't encourage conspicuous consumption or social welfare. At about 40%, blue represents the largest single component of the world's population . Due to the greater proportionate wealth and influence of orange-level peoples, however, blue holds only approximately 30% of the world's political power.
5. **“Orange”** – Blue gives way as people question authority. Leaders who abuse their positions might accelerate this change. As people naturally start to think they know better than the authorities, followers' loyalty to leaders gradually, cautiously, wanes. People begin to think more independently. As orange takes root, independence produces careerist and “entrepreneurial” thinking. People want more things; they see science and technology as paths to a better life. Sacrifice to a bigger purpose yields to pursuit of the good life. Groups and societies compete and seek status. Meritocracy prevails. To appeal to orange groups, focus on achievement, competency, collective need and the benefits of community. Only 30% of people are orange, but they hold about 50% of the power.
6. **“Green”** – Orange changes to green as people begin to seek companionship and meaning once their material possessions, individual achievements and status no longer deliver a thrill and isolation from true connectivity sparks loneliness. Competitiveness wanes as they focus on better communities and stewardship of their environments. Decisions made by the most competent few give way to “communitarian” consensus. At green's height, utility drives people, not greed, so they seek a simple life, uncluttered by unnecessary possessions. To encourage change at this level, subtly suggest that progress-by-committee is frustrating and ineffectual. Recommend drawing from the best attributes of other levels. Greens are about 10% of the population and hold roughly 15% of power.

“New markets, extraordinary advances in communications, and global sources of brain power and skilled labor will herald an explosion in business opportunities.”

The two “Tier Two” levels are:

1. **“Yellow”** – Ascent to the “second tier” is a greater leap than from level to level in the first tier. Here, beliefs and behaviors lose level-specific rigidity. People and groups climb to yellow as they become disillusioned with collectivism and its inefficiencies but still feel committed to the greater good. Yellow revives suppressed individualism but without orange's lifestyle and status drive. Yellow people and groups become systems driven and use data to build better processes and “integrated structures.” They execute these solutions by uniting people and teams from first-tier levels into an elegant design crafted for the problem at hand. This often happens with

little fanfare or need for recognition. Yellow people or groups are past competing with their peers and more focused on discovering self-identity while avoiding harming others. Yellow begins to give way when people see the limits on their individual ability to find answers and decide they need to be in a group to solve the bigger questions of human existence, origins and purpose. About 1% of people have reached yellow, and they control some 5% of world political power.

2. **“Turquoise”** – As people return to a more balanced collectivism after exploring selfhood in the world, they regain some of their blue-level self-sacrifice. Where yellow focuses on engineering, turquoise seeks to assemble the spiritual “whole,” with a basic focus on the environment, simple living and respect for those on all levels. The turquoise quest is connection to the fragile, interwoven web of life that all people and all living things form. In practice, turquoise can combine the forces of the other levels without sacrificing individuality. About 0.1% of the population is turquoise, and it has 1% of the power.

“The Six Conditions for Change”

To use SD to foster change in people and groups, six conditions must be present. The degree to which circumstances meet these conditions affects the extent and endurance of the change.

1. **“Potential”** – Is the person, organization or culture receptive to the type of change you seek? Are they in an “open state” (full steam ahead), an “arrested state” (address any barriers first and adjust your expectations) or a “closed state” (best not to try change)?
2. **“Solutions”** – Handle any issues still present at the current level before trying to solve problems with upward change. First make sure that the current platform is solid.
3. **“Dissonance”** – Introduce evidence that the current ways no longer suffice. Warn of imminent threats. Shake people’s complacency to get them into the change process.
4. **“Barriers”** – People and organizations erect barricades to change. Identify those blockades, lay them bare and deal with them before moving forward.
5. **“Insight”** – Articulate why the person or organization needs change. Describe what is broken and help people visualize what their lives will be like after the change.
6. **“Consolidation”** – Worthwhile change is a long process with gains and setbacks. Ongoing support is critical. For example, in organizational change, the CEO should be front and center, leading and supporting the change.

“The purpose of living is to be independent within reason, knowledgeable as much as possible and caring [as] much as [is] realistic.”

With those conditions, change is possible based on a sequential five-phase model:

1. **“The alpha fit”** – Things are fine. People are content. The system is working.

2. **“The beta condition”** – Minor problems grow large, and current solutions don’t work in new or shifting conditions. Doubts about the system become hard questions. Attempts to fix it by more intensely using the old tools just make things worse.
3. **“The gamma trap”** – Obvious problems mount. Denial is tempting; you might want to wait to see how bad things get before acting, but this is the crossroads for change. Move with speed to evade the storm. If the six conditions for change are too weak or if you procrastinate, you can get “trapped,” causing personal, organizational or societal collapse. Recovering from such a fall takes a long time or never happens.
4. **“The delta surge”** – If you escape the gamma trap, you’ll experience a thrilling period of relief and optimism. But pitfalls still exist. The change might be worse than what preceded it, or it could be false, precipitating a slide back to the trap.
5. **“The new alpha”** – If reform succeeded or you beat the gamma trap and you’ve solidified successful change. Shape new stability and contentment before the cycle begins anew.

“People are not types; they think about things in their lives in different ways.”

As a change leader, you can use accurate assessment of the six conditions and command of the five phases as tools for helping people and populations achieve lasting change. Work across multiple levels as you leverage strengths and design solutions for each level. Follow the principles of “politeness,” which means showing respect; “openness,” which requires listening; and “autocracy,” which in this context means taking responsibility and providing firm leadership.

“As these deeper mental and spiritual capacities are awakened, people will take a great step in development.”

Before you embark on a change quest, know what you are and what you want to become. Inventory the resources and tools you have for driving change. Plan future scenarios and communicate those visions throughout the group or population. Design a “workflow” that covers each element affecting the change process. Deploy a management team to assist throughout the program. Oversee the process at a high level to coordinate those who are implementing and managing the change. Keep it all moving by providing specialized solutions as problems arise.

About the Authors

Management and change consultant **Don Edward Beck** co-founded the National Values Center, where consultant **Christopher C. Cowan** is director. Cowan implements the Spiral Dynamics framework for organizations worldwide.



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