

Applying the Four Career Stages to Transition Acceleration

The following is a summary of **The Four Stages of Professional Careers**, written by Gene Dalton, Paul Thompson and Raymond Price. Published in 1977 in *Organizational Dynamics*, this research has profoundly shaped how organizations view and manage career progression. The following summary represents the application of this research to a particularly important phase in management development, the transition to management.

Overview

Research in the area of professional career development suggests that there are *four distinct stages* in a professional career life span. Each stage is characterized by unique performance expectations, *core activities/accountabilities*, and *central professional relationships*.

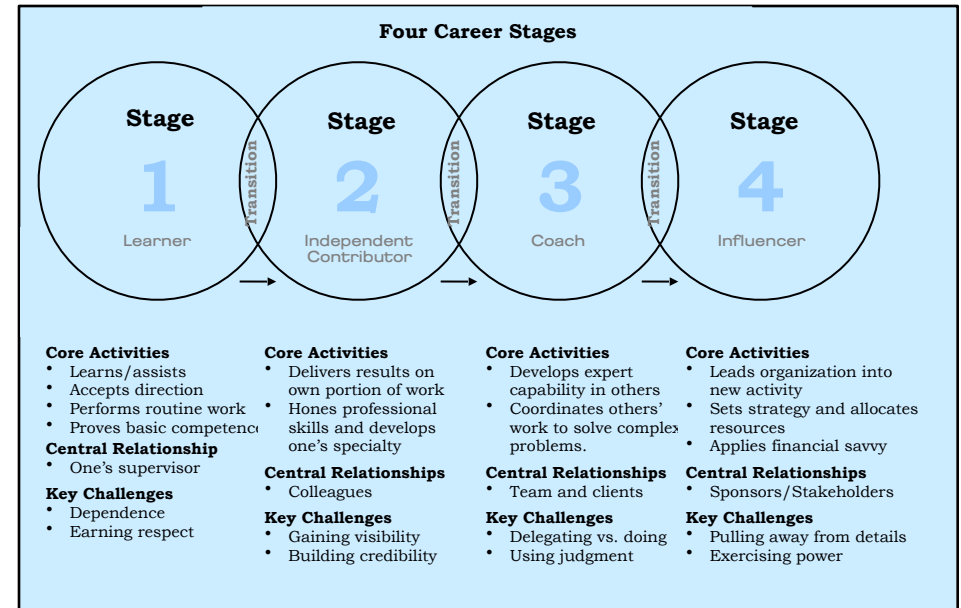
Knowledge of these four stages has been applied successfully in accelerating the transition process that individual contributors navigate as they move into management roles, thereby maximizing development as well as organizational contribution. In summary, an individual's contribution to the organization changes over time and successful career progression requires that a manager earns *credibility in their current stage and begins to meet the new contribution expectations for the next stage*.

The Four Career Stages

It is important to note that progression to a new stage has not been connected to one's level of experience, age, tenure or even promotion. In fact, if you are like most people who receive a promotion, you'll continue to perform the same activities that earned you the promotion, but with more gusto! This is a set up for failure. The fact is that transitioning to the next stage is *not about working harder*; it's about *contributing differently*.

For example, in Stage 1 an individual works under the direction of others, assisting and learning the ropes. In Stage 2 one demonstrates individual competence and develops expertise in one or two areas. In Stage 3 the focus broadens and coaching others becomes a primary activity. Stages 1, 2 and 3 are the "building block" stages; having time and earning credibility in each is the only way you can reach the final stage. This is because Stage 4 contributors provide broad-reaching leadership and influence over the entire organization or at the very least, a key area of the organization.

The following model depicts the progression from one stage to the next, as well as the core activities, central relationships and key challenges indicative of each.



Progression Through the Stages

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Looking inside corporations, *most* people move from the first stage to the second, *some* to the third, while *very few* move to the fourth. Some may even move back a stage. For example, a competent professional transitioning into Stage 3 may find formal supervisory responsibility to be confining and undesirable. If you find yourself in this situation, you and your boss will need to consider whether there is a role in which you can exert broad Stage 3 influence without supervising others or whether you should find a more appropriate Stage 2 role, such as a subject matter expert or other independent contributor role.

Characteristics of Stage 2 and 3

For the purposes of management transitions, we will focus on the progression from Stage 2 to Stage 3 – one of the most difficult transitions to make. This is because the *type of work* that becomes important in Stage 3 is radically different from Stage 2. It also requires *different behaviors* for success. Demands such as learning to manage and coach, loosening your grip on your well-known area of expertise, and being measured by your team’s output rather than just your own are *fundamental shifts* that need to be made.

As you make this transition, it will be critical to understand the differences between Stage 2 and 3 to ensure you are pushing yourself to assume Stage 3 activities, perspective, and responsibilities.

The following characteristics, compiled in part by ClientSkills, a firm specializing in enabling effective transitions, helps further clarify the differences between Stages 2 and 3. As you read each row, choose which characteristic from the two columns best describes how you spend most of your time.

Stage 2 Characteristics	Stage 3 Characteristics
<input type="checkbox"/> Focuses on performing well.	<input type="checkbox"/> Focuses on achieving business results.
<input type="checkbox"/> Meets requirements as part of a larger project, as assigned by others.	<input type="checkbox"/> Coordinates work of others in order to meet a key business/client need.
<input type="checkbox"/> Completes work often without delegating to others.	<input type="checkbox"/> Requires complex project management and delegating multiple pieces to others.

<input type="checkbox"/> Requires the application of one's expertise more than exceptional interpersonal skill.	<input type="checkbox"/> Requires exceptional interpersonal skill in order to meet standards (gaining buy in, team leadership, coaching, etc.).
<input type="checkbox"/> Solves problems related to tasks and assignments.	<input type="checkbox"/> Solves problems related to people issues.
<input type="checkbox"/> Makes short-term plans for implementation of work.	<input type="checkbox"/> Makes long-range plans for implementation of others' work.
<input type="checkbox"/> Seeks projects that enhance one's own skill and experience level.	<input type="checkbox"/> Seeks projects that drive the business.
<input type="checkbox"/> Uses appropriate processes/tools to ensure effectiveness.	<input type="checkbox"/> Develops broadly used processes/tools that lead to greater effectiveness.
<input type="checkbox"/> Offers technical solutions to common challenges.	<input type="checkbox"/> Asks a variety of people for possible solutions and coordinates responses to solve complex challenges.
<input type="checkbox"/> Has limited relationships with people mostly "like them" (in level, area of expertise, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/> Uses a network of relationships across many levels and areas of the organization.
<input type="checkbox"/> Develops one's own capability with some opportunity to teach others.	<input type="checkbox"/> Develops and coaches others in the application of their talents, abilities and interests.

Note that these characteristics are tied to **behavior, which can be modified with great flexibility; rather than demanding a **change in personality**, which typically does not vary over time.*

Transitioning to Stage 3

Given that *what made you successful in Stage 2 can actually cause you to fail in Stage 3*, you will need to be persistent about “*behaving yourself into*” Stage 3. For example, if you continue to perform specialized, activities you were once rewarded for, you will fail to delegate and develop the talents of others. You will also find yourself buried in activity that does not allow you to see the broader picture. Therefore, you will need to move away from the familiar and enticing Stage 2 work and find gratification in the activities associated with Stage 3.

In order to do this, you will need to broaden your *abilities* (coaching, delegation, team leadership, process development, etc.), your *knowledge* (know the business, competition, how to apply the expertise in your team to meet business objectives, etc.) and *relationships* (to include direct reports, clients, senior leaders, etc.).

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In so doing, it will be important to earn the *trust of your team*, earn *credibility as a leader* with your key clients, and initiate and *leverage a development partnership* with your boss and other mentors.

Application of the Four-Stage Model

Becoming aligned with your manager on key topics related to the career stages will be a critical step toward your transition. Two questions should guide this alignment.

Please discuss and come to an agreement with your manager about the following:

Accelerating Transitions, not Stages

The following highlights the importance of spending enough time building credibility in each of the “building block” stages.

Stage 1 – The Learner

Trying to escape the routine tasks and subordinate relationships indicative of Stage 1 will preclude the individual from building a solid reputation based upon performance. Since this stage is foundational for future development and success, time in grade in Stage 1 cannot be circumvented. Most individuals spend eight to 12 months in this stage.

Stage 2 – The Independent Contributor

Successful navigation of Stage 2 results in the manager developing an area of expertise and a further burnished reputation. Many professionals remain in Stage 2 throughout their careers, making substantial contributions and experiencing a high degree of satisfaction. However, the probability of contributing at a high level diminishes over time unless you stay “on the cutting edge” or move beyond this stage. Those that don’t wish to their edge” and commit to continuous learning to be an learning expert in their area should limit time in this stage to six to 10 years to avoid diminished credibility and performance.

Stage 3 – The Coach

Having a strong core of Stage 3 players is vastly important to organizations. Front-line and higher level management professionals guide Stage 1 and 2 players in order to meet business objectives. This stage allows for the development of skills such as coaching, team leadership, project management and complex problem-solving, which serve as a foundation for future executive talent. Time in this stage varies as some remain until retirement. At a minimum, most spend eight to 10 years here before moving to Stage 4.

What stage of contribution are you currently operating in?

How did you identify this stage?

Guidance:

- Take the time to introspect. Please reflect upon the types of actions that you *typically* perform each day to determine in which stage you are currently contributing.
- If you are new to the organization and to your management role, you may find that you need to speed through Stage 1 (the learner), do some quick PR for yourself and gain credibility in your areas of expertise (Stage 2 - the independent contributor) and then progress to Stage 3. All three will be necessary for your team and clients to view you as a credible manager.
- Separate “performance” from “contribution” as you make this decision. Star performers are found at all stages so this won’t be a determining factor.
- Keep in mind that your position does not determine your current stage (e.g., it would be naive to say, “I have a manager title, and so must be functioning in Stage 3.”). If you are new to your management role, for instance, it’s likely that you are still exhibiting many Stage 1 and 2 characteristics when approaching your work.
- It is not uncommon for new “people managers” to attempt to do Stage 3 work, with a Stage 2 mindset (e.g., working harder/more, rather than differently).

Question 1

Perhaps the biggest pitfall new managers will face is assuming that what has made them successful to this point in their career will continue to do so. The danger of sticking with what they know, working extremely hard at doing it and failing miserably are very real...Think hard about the differences between your old role and new role and determine early on what ways you’ll have to think and act differently.

~ Michael Watkins, “The First 90 Days,” Harvard Business School Press, 2003

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Question 2

What specific actions must you take to move toward Stage 3?

Guidance:

- Identify the current activities/behaviors that may be more representative of a Stage 2 mindset.
- Identify the current activities/behaviors that currently represent Stage 3 work.
- Identify a few key accomplishments/projects that would require a Stage 3 approach (requires leveraging others/your team, delegation, coaching, big picture problem-solving, process improvement and implementation, etc.). These will be helpful drivers to *force* you into Stage 3.