A Perspective Leading the Way for Development

By Bjørn Kassøe Andersen

People think and prioritise differently. We know this from family life, we meet it daily in our work life, and we see it in political life, both locally and globally. People from the same neighbourhood, the same city, the same country and the same planet can be worlds apart.

The model of development described in the Spiral Dynamics system is helpful in understanding differences in people's way of thinking. The model gives a dynamic, holistic perspective on the development of people's values and worldviews. It focuses on coherence and on the bigger picture, and it can lead the way for individuals and their organisations to develop their potential. The model is also useful in assessing when, and how, to make room for transformation and new directions, based on new values and new ways of thinking.

The basic idea of the model is that our worldviews and value systems evolve in stages, both historically and in our individual lives. Certain ways of thinking (worldviews and values) sweep over people, organisations, ethnic groups and countries like waves, formed by their current life conditions.

In each wave or phase people focus on different values:

BEIGE	**Survival and nourishment**	Instincts; Food, water, warmth, sex
PURPLE	**Tradition and security**	Tribe/clan/family; Honour, ancestors and spirits; Rituals and symbols
RED	**Power and action**	Control of others; Satisfaction of the senses; "Them" vs "Us"
BLUE	**Stability and order**	Obedience is rewarded; Higher meaning and certainty; Regularity
ORANGE	**Competition and success**	Effectiveness; No limits; Influence and autonomy
GREEN	**Sensitivity and community**	Emotional caring; Mutual growth; Togetherness and community
YELLOW	**Flow and competence**	Independence and self-confidence; Flexibility and context; Good questions
TURQUOISE	**Wholeness and balance**	Global eco-social balance; Survival of Planet Earth; collective spiritual consciousness

A map of the worldview and value system of people, organisations, groups and populations, will always contain several colours. In other words, the model is not designed to provide a simple typology of the way people think, but focuses rather on the systemic dynamics and evolution of the way people understand the world they live in. Human evolution is seen as a spiral, i.e. a complex, non-linear pattern where the phases unfold gradually, and at the same time previous types of reaction stay active or latently accessible.

Many of the developmental trends that we see around us can be described as transitional phases between two or more colours. Examples include:

- The welfare models of the Scandinavian countries are to a large degree based on orange to green thinking (the humane version of capitalism), and are currently being challenged by the all-encompassing orange globalisation and blue Islamic and to some extent also Christian fundamentalism. In Denmark a growing number of people are on the quest for a yellow thinking that can contain the rising complexity of the world, while avoiding that the green welfare system falls apart.

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- Since the 1980s the Danish public sector has been in transition from blue to orange, i.e. from a formal bureaucracy to a more effective orange goal-oriented operation. The telecommunication companies and the Postal Service are no longer blue structures but have undergone a transition to orange business terms. The Danish Patent and Trademark Office has changed from slow, bureaucratic and formalistic (blue) to a well-structured, service-oriented company (blue-orange), capable of functioning in a world where knowledge and global networks (yellow) are of increasing importance.

- Many political activists are in the green to yellow zone where, based on humane and politically correct (green) values, they attempt to tie together separate systems and environments. The Max Havelaar organisation is an example of this.[1] They do fair trade, i.e. they give the poorest farmers and workers a reasonable price for quality goods, based on networking, communications skills and the creation of new channels for commerce.

- In many places in Africa global imbalances are played out in red-blue conflicts, and many poverty refugees look towards Europe, dreaming of the kind of orange success they see on the Western satellite-transmitted TV networks. Around its two North-African enclaves Spain has built 6-7 meter high fences guarded by infrared cameras – a blue attempt at containment. But having breached the fence these economic refugees are largely treated according to the green-orange ideals of UN's conventions on refugees and human rights, ratified by all European countries.

- Companies and organisations that think yellow often have great potentials for change and growth. Among the characteristics of yellow organisations are:
  – Constant adaptation and change.
  – Principles instead of rules.
  – Focus on flexibility or structure, depending on the situation at hand.
  – Business, learning, playing, social occasions and family are combined.
  – Networking and connections rather than hierarchies and single-line systems; focus on synergy and diversity.
  – Focus on time and quality of life rather than status and material wealth.
  – Greater variation as to where, how, and when the work is done.
  – Less loyalty in relation to one's group and organisation, more loyalty in relation to one's function, profession and own needs.
  – Greater focus on social conditions, both locally and globally.
  – Multi-dimensional interests and an expectation of being able to satisfy both body and spirit. [2]

The colour codes can serve as a schematic and simplified description of transitions and developmental tendencies. An example: When Danish society is challenged by increasing globalisation and increasing immigration, some people will become 'rigid green' and resist any re-interpretation of human rights and refugee conventions. Others will 'think yellow' and regard the development as an opportunity and a challenge requiring adaptation. Some will revert to a blue faith-based thinking in the attempt to rediscover their Danish heritage and identity, and some will go even further back and violently confront that which is perceived as new and foreign – based on red-purple thinking.

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[1] http://www.maxhavelaar.be/

[2] Based on Spiral Dynamics: The Layers of Human Values in Strategy, p. 9 – see bibliography.

All earlier worldviews/value systems can be found - even on an individual basis. The energetic and goal-oriented entrepreneur (orange) may have grown up in a home with a strictly rule-based upbringing (blue), and may perhaps previously have been a leader in a purple-red youth subculture. A law professor and expert in human rights (blue to orange) may live out his or her red and orange sides by performing martial arts, and may when younger have flirted with a totalitarian left-wing ideology (blue) – and now, however, be able to contain and accommodate all these apparently contradictory ways of thinking (yellow).

The point is that one worldview/value system is neither better nor worse than another. They are all necessary developmental steps, and the first phases are preconditions to the latter ones. In this way the model also describes how human life unfolds: starting with the total dependence of the infant (beige), moving through family and ego consciousness (purple to red), the search for ultimate meaning (blue), focus on independence and career (orange), emotional maturity (green), and a more comprehensive care in relation to the future of ones offspring and the future of the earth (yellow to turquoise).

The development swings back and forth between the individual and the collective like a pendulum. In beige thinking the focus is on individual survival, and organisation is rather unstructured. In purple thinking the collective, the rituals, the forefathers, the spirits etc. give security. In red thinking, individuals with a strong ego-consciousness show the way to powerful action. In blue thinking a higher power governs individual existence. Authority is sanctioned by this higher power, and individuals who disobey this authority suffer guilt as a consequence. In orange thinking, creative individuals break out of the blue boundaries and create their own route to success. In green thinking, orange materialism is discarded, and the focus again is on the collective, although now with the community as the highest ideal and social expulsion as the sanctioning force. With yellow thinking the focus swings back on the individual who as a free agent tries to connect and coordinate systems that are out of step. In turquoise thinking, where the focus is on wholeness and the survival of the earth, the collective aspect once again prevails.

Hence, if you by means of the colours try to visualise the development or the different aspects of a person, a society or a conflict, you will get a highly complex set of images.

The developmental model can give people an experience of space and of room for change. Do you recognise, e.g., the situation where the organisation is becoming rigid because of rules and 'this is how we usually do it' (blue structure), and where an orange wave – e.g. a merger with another organisation in order to obtain the benefits of large-scale operation – is met with protests and resistance. The leader that can show the employees that orange thinking will give them more independence, more drive and personal success, will gradually become a welcome agent for change.

Or how about the situation where everybody must be heard, everybody must take part and contribute – and nothing happens. This is a typical stalemate in the green phase. What happens is that the ideal of the green phase, 'the community', becomes so elevated that it overshadows everything else. An orange, effective person will not be able to change this; typically such a person will either experience silent resistance or be rebuked because green thinking cannot be inclusive of orange. However, a stalemate like this can be resolved by a yellow thinking person who can short-circuit the community logic and at the same time express understanding and respect for green values – e.g. by pointing to the possibilities and relief it brings if the community asks its most competent members to suggest a solution.

These examples also illustrate another structure in the model:

Thinking based on one paradigm (first tier)	**BEIGE**	**Survival and nourishment**
	PURPLE	**Tradition and security**
	RED	**Power and action**
	BLUE	**Ideology and truth**
	ORANGE	**Competition and success**
	GREEN	**Humanity and community**
Thinking that contains several paradigms (second tier)	**YELLOW**	**Coherence and competence**
	TURQUOISE	**Wholeness and balance**

Each of the first six steps is characterised by a way of thinking that only contains one paradigm.[3] People who have this kind of thinking have a hard time accepting other forms of thinking. When two different ways of thinking meet, the parties involved typically define themselves in opposition to each other, and it is difficult for both parties to accept, let alone understand and appreciate, the worldview and the values of the other.

Blue thinking, because of its focus on law and order, will regard itself as better and more correct than red thinking, with its focus on control, power and action as exemplified by street gangs and the governments of certain developing countries. Green-orange thinking with its focus on community and equal rights for all does not understand the purple-red life conditions which create the basis for corruption, clan structures and special rituals that must be upheld. Orange reformers will regard blue state systems and blue hierarchies rooted in religion as obstacles that have no real value.

As opposed to this, thinking is multi-dimensional in the yellow, turquoise and subsequent phases (which in the Spiral Dynamics system so far only are described vaguely). The thinker himself/herself has the knowledge and the experience that worldviews and value systems merely are tools to navigate in the world, they are not the world in themselves.

Yellow thinking people try to actively transform and connect the energy and the resources that in the other phases are locked down in conflicts and dead ends.

A yellow thinking person can be impatient and cut through without hesitation. The yellow thinking person will cut to the chase – and at the same time be able to meet and understand the thinking of the other phases, e.g. purple's need for ceremony, red's confronting way of expression, blue's need of formal structure, orange's need of individual status and green's need of emotional contact.

In this way yellow thinking persons have access to, and can function in, the previous worldviews and value systems whenever it is necessary or relevant – and the attitude towards the way of thinking in the other phases is inclusive and accepting and free of evaluations of whether they are 'right' or 'wrong'.

In addition, in each of the phases the thinking can be open, shut or locked. If it is open, people will be willing to change as soon as circumstances allow it. If the thinking is shut, change can only happen through effort or bigger changes in circumstances. If the thinking is locked, there is no immediate basis

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[3] Beck and Cowan use the terms first tier and second tier. They connect first tier with subsistence and second tier with being. They describe the worldview in second tier as rich with information, multi-dimensional, and part of a complex, interactive system. Graves describes the transition from first to second tier as 'a momentous leap'.

for change. A significant worsening of the current life conditions, even up to war, is necessary before enough people become agents for change.

Through an evaluation of the extent to which a situation is open, shut or locked, one can see if it is likely that effort can lead the way for development and change – both in regard to individuals, organisations and societies. If the situation has aspects that are shut or locked, constructive growth would presuppose dealing with that which is shut or locked. The following factors are in play:

- The degree of readiness in the involved parties to enter a new phase (open mind).
- Have the problems of the current phase been solved?
- Are there sufficiently clear signs that change is necessary (e.g. increasing dissatisfaction or lack of creativity)?
- Have current barriers been identified? What in the current worldview prevents moving forward? Is there sufficient understanding of causes and possible alternatives?
- Is there sufficient support to a new understanding of the world and its phenomena?

When applied in this way, the Spiral Dynamics system is very useful for prioritising one's energy where development and change are most likely to take place. The meta-language of the model makes it possible in a few words to comprehend and describe ways of thinking and value systems and the way they interact. In brief, it is a precise and useful map in a time characterized by an increasingly complex globalised development.

The work of Clare Graves and the Spiral Dynamics system have been described as "the theory that explains everything".[4] If taken at face value, one might mistakenly conclude that other theories no longer are necessary, or that yellow or turquoise thinking are better than other ways of understanding the world. If you think like this, you have entered a blue, one-dimensional worldview where the focus is on truth, ideology and higher meaning.

With this little caveat we warmly recommend that you take a ride in the helicopter and use this model of development to get an overview of your own and others' worldviews and value systems.

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[4] Don E. Beck uses the slogan "The Theory that Explains Everything" on his website, www.spiraldynamics.net. The Canadian Maclean's Magazine in 1967 referred to the theories of Clare W. Graves as "a theory that explains everything".

Literature and web references with comments:

Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowan, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change*, 1996. The book is comprehensive. It unpacks the special terms that Beck and Cowan have developed on the basis of Graves' original work. It describes transition phases and dynamics in detail. I found it unstructured and somewhat repetitive. The book has no index, but an index can be downloaded here: http://www.spiraldynamics.org/materials/reprints.htm.

A Mini-Course in Spiral Dynamics, NVC Consulting, 2001. http://www.spiraldynamics.org/pdf_resources/SDMC.pdf. A short, easily accessible article. It looks as if Cowan is the author or co-author (the article is found on his organisation's website).

Christopher C. Cowan and Natasha Todorovic, *Spiral Dynamics: The Layers of Human Values in Strategy*, Strategy & Leadership 28, 1, 2000, pp. 4-11, MCB University Press, http://www.emeraldinsight.com/pdfs/2002121.pdf (payment required).

The Never-Ending Upward Quest – An Interview with Dr. Don Beck by Jessica Roemischer, http://www.wie.org/j22/beck.asp. A good and easy-to-read article with Beck as main source. The article is from the magazine *What is Enlightenment?*, founded by American spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen.

Beck and Cowan terminated their cooperation in 1999. Since then, Beck has cooperated with Ken Wilber, see e.g. http://integralnaked.org/. In his book *Integral Spirituality* (2006) Wilber has criticised Beck's use of Spiral Dynamics as a theory that explains everything. Cowan is critical of Wilber's use of the Spiral Dynamics terms. See e.g. http://www.spiraldynamics.org/faq_integral.htm#Wilber. On the uncritical use of the Spiral Dynamics theories, see the article *An SD Expert? A Dozen Tell-Tale Signs of the Amateur* in a newsletter from Cowan's organisation, March 2005, http://www.spiraldynamics.org/newsletters/SD_March2005.pdf.

Website of Don E. Beck's organisation: http://www.spiraldynamics.net/
Website of Christopher C. Cowan's organisation: http://www.spiraldynamics.org/
Both of these websites link to other websites, newsletters, articles and books, including material written by Clare W. Graves.