SLII®

# What Do We Know About Development Level?

Since the inception of SLII®, we've been asked about the validity of our concept of development level. This white paper will provide a deeper understanding of that as well as a recap of the relevant academic research* that supports the four components of development level:

- Goal- or task-specific knowledge and skills
- Transferable skills
- Motivation
- Confidence

## Human Development and Development Level

If you were to examine the literature on human development—not animal learning theory applied to humans[1]—you would find that the research is split between child development[2] and adult development.[3]

*In some instances, the language usually found in the academic literature was replaced in this article by more commonly used language. For example, the word "self-efficacy" was replaced by the word "confidence," even though self-efficacy is the word used by most researchers.

Throughout the article, there are endnotes with references to confirming research. These are indicated by superscripted numbers. There is also a complete reference list.

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Adult development is further divided into adult learning theory, adult skill acquisition, and adult life-span development.[4] SLII is supported by the research on adult skill acquisition at work.[5] Early attempts to understand adult skill acquisition were based on an ability development perspective. Other attempts were based on a motivation or efficacy perspective. This research, which is relatively recent,[6] will be important to you in teaching others about the skill of diagnosing and about the concept of development level in SLII.

***To understand development level***, you need to understand

- How competence (or goal- or task-specific knowledge and skills and transferable skills) is acquired (See the text under Competence as an Aspect of Performance.)

- How commitment is developed (See the text under Commitment as an Aspect of Performance.)

To master the skill of diagnosing, you have to understand how the interaction of competence and commitment—the two components of development level—affect performance at the four levels in development. (See the text under The Interaction of Competence and Commitment on Performance.)

Competence and commitment are the basic determinants of learning and performance.[7] In order to gain and sustain performance, an individual needs to know *what* and *how* (competence) as well as have a belief in his or her abilities (confidence) and a desire to achieve an outcome or complete a task well (motivation). These determinants are goal or task specific, since levels of competence and commitment vary from one goal or task to another.

## Competence as an Aspect of Performance

Competence is defined here the same way it's defined in academic literature: "the demonstration of sequenced, coordinated actions that accomplishes a particular desired outcome." It is stated this way because

- Competence is behavioural—it has to be demonstrated.

- Outcomes are usually accomplished by taking several different actions in some coordinated sequence.

- Competence is goal or task specific. It is contingent upon the requirements of a particular outcome.

Goal- or task-specific competence—knowing what to do and how to get the desired results—is relative to specific actions or outcomes. It is acquired through hard work; is perfected with time, effort, and guidance; and can be demonstrated. Competence is contingent upon goal- or task-specific knowledge and experience as well as the ability to use generalised or transferable skills to achieve a goal or outcome. Let's look at these two types of skills separately.

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## Goal– or Task–Specific Knowledge and Skills as an Aspect of Competence

Goal or task knowledge is defined as "the information, experience, or knowledge necessary to accomplish a particular outcome or task." For example, although there are some similarities between Apple software and PC software, if someone had specific task knowledge and experience using an Apple computer, he or she would still need to have additional knowledge and experience to use a PC. He or she might be competent on one computer but not the other. The task knowledge necessary to be proficient on the Apple computer is different than on the PC. Even if an individual can bring certain transferable skills to a specific goal or task, it does not mean he or she can automatically demonstrate the necessary competence to achieve specific outcomes.

## Transferable Skills as an Aspect of Competence

Transferable skills are defined as "those skills that cut across several different jobs or tasks that someone may have to accomplish." Research suggests that transferable skills are often described as general intelligence, perceptual speed, or psychomotor abilities.[8] These skills are contingently important, depending on what needs to be accomplished. More specifically, transferable skills involve the ability to acquire and store information in memory, and then retrieve, combine, compare, and use it in new contexts.[9] General abilities (e.g., reasoning) and broad context abilities (e.g., verbal, numeric, and spatial abilities) can predict individual differences in learning speed and task performance.[10]

Planning, writing, and speaking are examples of transferable skills that can be applied to different work outcomes. For example, to be an effective teacher of leadership theory, a person would need to know the theory (goal- or task-specific knowledge and skills) and be able to demonstrate the generalised (or transferable) skills related to teaching: presentation skills, instructional design skills, and classroom-management skills. These skills are considered transferable since they can be used to teach any topic. Sustained performance requires both transferable skills and specific goal- or task-related knowledge and skills. If you want to develop someone's skills, you may need to help him or her hone his or her transferable skills and/or acquire or expand his or her specific goal-related knowledge and skills.

## The Acquisition of Knowledge

The acquisition of knowledge—whether generalised or outcome specific—has historically been described in terms of levels or stages[11]:

- Basic or foundational knowledge level
- Integration knowledge level
- Routine, demonstrated knowledge level[12]

These three knowledge levels shape and naturally evolve as skills are acquired. The development levels in the SLII® Model are based on these knowledge levels.

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## Basic or Foundational Knowledge Level

This level consists of seemingly disparate knowledge, facts, and information that are related to the desired outcomes. Learners at this point are trying to understand the desired end results and the how-tos in accomplishing the goal or task. At this level, learners need to observe, memorise, and practice discrete steps, rules, and procedures to develop thought patterns related to achieving desired outcomes.

Building foundational knowledge takes a great deal of time, and learners at this level will be prone to errors. In addition, they will have difficulty processing secondary information, such as the inclusion of more detailed or additional steps related to task accomplishment. In this level of knowledge, it is hard for learners to simply stay on top of the basic what and how.

*This level of knowledge is typical of someone at D1 or D2.*

## Integration Knowledge Level

At this level, learners are able to integrate facts and information into a logical, replicable sequence of behaviours and actions that are required to achieve desired outcomes. They can commit to memory the processes, rules, and requirements, and they learn how to simplify and streamline steps, procedures, or actions. Learners can integrate and appreciate all the how-tos they need to master to accomplish the goal and can move this information into long-term memory.

The learners' focus moves from intake to understanding and from "how to" to "how come." They view additional information about the goal or task as supplemental, not tangential. The learners' speed and accuracy in achieving the goal or task markedly improves with practice. When secondary or competing outcomes are added, the learning process may be interrupted, but primary outcomes aren't compromised by the additional complexity. The whys become important, especially if the learning environment changes or the performance requirements change because of new circumstances.
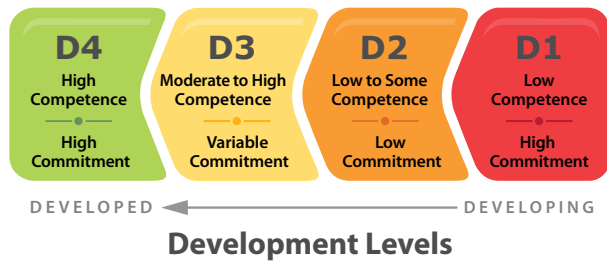
*This level of knowledge is typical of someone at D2 or D3; remember that development levels are a continuum, not discrete stages of learning.*

## Routine Demonstrated Knowledge Level

In this level, learners can quickly and accurately demonstrate outcomes upon request. They have the skills to automatically perform the task without paying much attention to it because the skills have been committed to memory. Actions can be executed without conscious effort. With consistent practice, skill performance becomes so accurate and expedient that secondary information and tasks can be added without loss of performance.

Certain transferable skills—memory, reasoning, listening, intake, sequencing, and attention span—are incredibly valuable at this stage of learning/ development. These generalised skills can determine a learner's learning time and performance, and determine his or her understanding of goal or task requirements and how-tos.

*This level of knowledge is typical of someone at D4 or D3.*

| D4 | D3 | D2 | D1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| High Competence | Moderate to High Competence | Low to Some Competence | Low Competence |
| High Commitment | Variable Commitment | Low Commitment | High Commitment |

DEVELOPED ← ——————— DEVELOPING

**Development Levels**

## Implications

As a leader, it's important to be aware of this natural progress in learning from basic to integrated to routine levels of knowledge as you help your team members develop new skills. These knowledge levels help explain the challenges that team members at D1, D2, or D3 might encounter, especially if you are inattentive to or unfamiliar with how the competence or skills are acquired.

## Indicators of Competence

Consider the following questions when gauging your team member's ability to achieve a specific goal or task. Does he or she

- *Have a history or performance record with the goal or task?*
- *Have the technical knowledge and skills required for the goal or task?*
- *Know how to accomplish the goal or task?*
- *Understand the requirements of the goal or task?*
- *Appreciate the complexities of the goal or task?*
- *See and understand the nuances of the goal or task?*
- *Understand the importance of the goal or task?*
- *Know and understand the organisational politics involved in accomplishing the goal or task?*
- *Possess the planning skills necessary to accomplish the goal or task?*
- *Possess the interpersonal skills necessary to accomplish the goal or task?*
- *Demonstrate the follow-through skills necessary to accomplish the goal or task?*

If the majority of the answers are *no* or *little*, your team member may not be able to accomplish the goal or task on his or her own without your direction and support. If the majority of the answers are *I don't know,* don't assume that they can accomplish the goal or task, especially if it is very important to you and the organisation. Either engage in an Alignment Conversation to explore these questions about competence, or provide the direction and support your team member needs to develop his or her goal-specific and transferable knowledge and skills.

## Commitment as an Aspect of Performance

A learner's commitment—the psychological impetus to do what's necessary to accomplish a goal or task—influences his or her performance. Commitment is attitudinal; it is the "want to do" frame of mind that helps a learner persevere in the face of missteps or failure.

There are two major perspectives regarding the attitudinal aspects of learning and performance. Some researchers have studied commitment from the motivational perspective,[13] while others have studied it from the self-confidence perspective.[14]

- The motivational perspective asserts that the learner's energy comes from what he or she expects to gain as a result of goal accomplishment and that he or she will derive some benefit. It suggests that a performer loses motivation to accomplish an outcome when it does not satisfy their need or purpose.

- The self-confidence perspective suggests that a learner self-monitors and self-evaluates performance based on desired outcomes. When there is a large discrepancy between the desired outcome and the learner's performance, it causes discouragement, negativity, and a loss of faith in his or her ability to succeed. The learner may conclude that they cannot accomplish the task or outcome without someone's help. This loss of confidence often results in lower attention and effort.

You've probably experienced the loss of motivation or confidence on certain goals or tasks you've wanted to accomplish. This is true for everyone at one time or another. The challenge for you as a leader is to clearly understand why this happens so that you can help your team members move through periods of low commitment. A clear understanding of the foundations of commitment should help you as well as allow you to help others regain their motivation and confidence to perform and grow.

There are two important aspects of the research on commitment that need to be described in more detail: self-determination as it pertains to motivation and self-efficacy as it pertains to confidence. Let's start with motivation.

### Motivation as an Aspect of Commitment

There are four major theories of motivation, each with its own strengths and weaknesses: Reinforcement Theory, Expectancy Theory, Achievement Motivation Theory, and Self-Determination Theory.[15] Blanchard® believes that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has the greatest potential for helping learners acquire skills in the workplace. A basic premise of SDT is that leaders cannot motivate their followers; they can only create an environment in which followers can choose to motivate themselves. SDT is based upon the principle that all human beings have psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness with others, and competence. While it is impossible to describe and explain the full nature of Self-Determination Theory here, the works of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan or Deci and Flaste[16] are great sources for deepening your understanding of SDT.

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Various schools of thought[17] ascribe different meanings to the word "motivation." For your purposes in teaching SLII, work motivation is defined as "the desire to overcome obstacles, exercise power, and strive to do something difficult to the highest level possible." It is a person's willingness to put forth effort in pursuit of desired outcomes. This willingness or desire is based on several motivational outlooks the learner might choose.

Blanchard's definition and theory of motivation are based on a firm belief that motivation is a skill that can be developed. Blanchard® has developed the training program Optimal Motivation® that can help you decide which motivational outlooks work for you and your team members. Optimal Motivation helps individuals understand six motivational outlooks: Disinterested, External, Imposed, Aligned, Integrated, and Inherent. The program espouses that individuals have choices for why they act the way they do, and that they can intentionally shift their motivational outlook if they are committed to making the shift and are supported in that effort by their leader and organisation.

## Confidence as an Aspect of Commitment

Confidence is a person's "positive judgment of his or her ability to organise and execute a course of action to attain a level of performance."[18] It is not the skills a person has, but self-judgments of what needs to be done with those skills.[19] Since confidence has been shown to predict performance[20] as well as to influence learning outcomes and post-training transfer of the skills to the job,[21] helping a person become a self-reliant achiever—and believe in themself and the skills they possesses—is important.

As you would suspect, a learner's confidence about their skills develops gradually, with practice. There are several antecedents for this development. They are internal, or that which is personal to the learner (an individual's personality, mood, skills, knowledge, motives, and performance-related know-how), and external, or that which is contingent on task or resources (task complexity, task difficulty, distractions, and a sense of one's control or autonomy over the learning process).[22]

Learners monitor their own performance and make judgments about their success. Confidence develops as success increases and the learner attributes the success to their abilities and efforts. More specifically, learners focus their attention not only on the outcomes, but also on specific aspects of their behavior that influence those outcomes. Learners focus on the hows *and* the outcomes.

In the beginning, the hows are more important than the outcomes for learners in developing confidence. Their attention is susceptible to external influence, and confidence can be impeded when outcomes are considered more important than the strategies or how-tos for achieving them.[23]

When learners self-evaluate the gap between current performance and desired outcomes, they can make judgments that influence future efforts. When the gap is small, they remain positive about and satisfied with their progress. Repeated small gaps between performance and desired outcomes may even result in less frequent self-evaluations. When the gaps are large, learners can become

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negative and dissatisfied. They may stop trying or expend even more effort.[24] In both cases, self-judgments increase until success is attained or trying stops.

Your role as a leader is to help your team members understand that self-judgment is normal and needed to develop skills and self-reliance. But self-judgment should not be done so frequently and critically that it prevents trying.

The way in which you give your team members feedback on performance has a significant effect on their self-confidence on a particular outcome. In the beginning, it's important to focus on the successful accomplishment of the steps in the learning process—the how-tos—not on the accomplishment of outcomes. Your role is also to regulate the external factors, such as distractions, outcome complexity, and difficulty, to increase your team members' sense of autonomy.

## Indicators of Commitment

Consider the following questions when gauging your team member's commitment to achieving a specific goal or task. Some questions will be less applicable depending on the specific goal or task.

- *Has your team member shown an interest in the goal or task?*
- *Is the assignment of the goal or task reasonable, given your team member's workload?*
- *Has your team member seemed eager to take on the goal or task?*
- *Has your team member shown initiative in achieving the goal or task or similar goals or tasks?*
- *Are there any personal circumstances that need to be considered before your team member accepts the goal or task?*
- *Has your team member shown a willingness to take the right risks to achieve the goal or task?*
- *Has your team member shown persistence in achieving the goal or task (or similar goals or tasks) in the face of difficulty?*
- *Has your team member shown a desire to work independently, if appropriate, in achieving the goal or task?*
- *Has your team member shown a tolerance for ambiguity that is appropriate for achieving the goal or task?*
- *Has your team member shown confidence about the goal or task?*
- *Has your team member shown a desire to get ahead in the organisation?*
- *Would your team member view the assignment as being aligned with future goals?*

If the majority of the answers are *no*, your team member may possess little or no commitment to accomplishing the specific goal or task. Your role as a leader is to determine whether the problem is a motivation issue or a confidence issue and use the appropriate supportive leader behaviours to facilitate movement toward greater commitment.

## The Interaction of Competence and Commitment on Performance

There are four important caveats to consider when diagnosing or confirming someone's development level:

- **Don't confuse low or poor performance with development level.** Low performance can occur at any level of development. An individual at D1 may not be performing well because of a lack of skill. Someone at D2 may be discouraged at their lack of progress and not perform well. An individual at D3 can stop performing or contributing due to low confidence. Someone at D4 can stop performing or contributing because of boredom, a change in the person's motivational outlook, or his or her skills getting a little rusty.

- **Recognize that if a learner has moved from D4 to D3** (he or she has been performing well on a goal or task, but is not doing so now), **chances are the lack of performance is not competence**, since past performance suggests high competence. Unless task requirements have changed dramatically, the reason for a drop in performance is probably due to a change in the quality of his or her motivation.

- **Try to understand the underlying reasons for a drop in commitment before taking action.** Engage in an Alignment Conversation to explore the reasons for a drop in commitment. It is not your job as a leader to fix an off-the-job issue, such as a loss of a loved one or a divorce/separation. Time and skillful counseling may help. But it is your obligation to uncover and understand the reasons for the change in commitment in order to help the team member restore some sort of balance to the personal factors that are influencing on-the-job commitment and focus. With on-the-job issues—such as disenchantment caused by broken promises, lack of opportunity, loss of status, job plateaus, low or unresolved pay issues, and career development concerns—you are obligated to not only understand these factors but also to engage the employee in problem solving. Your job is to help your team member give voice to these issues so that they can be addressed and your team member can recommit and reengage.

- **Consistently share and negotiate your assessment of your team member's development level with him or her.** An Alignment Conversation is a great tool to open communication. You and your team member can both get your needs met if goals, development level, and the matching leadership style are discussed. These conversations should give your team member an opportunity to ask you for what he or she needs. If there are irreconcilable differences in perceived levels of competence and commitment on a specific goal or task, and the stakes are low, you should give your team member the benefit of the doubt by going along with his or her assessment. If the stakes are high and timelines are short, you should ask him or her to go along with your assessment.

## Conclusion

This paper makes a supporting argument for the rationale that development in a professional setting and in regard to professional tasks and goals is a sequential and linear process composed of competence (goal- or task-specific knowledge and skills and transferable skills) and commitment (self-determination as it relates to motivation and self-efficacy as related to confidence).

When individuals are faced with learning a new skill, they judge their own ability to perform as they engage in the task as well as the amount of energy and attention required to complete the task. If their judgment about their performance is positive, it leads to an increase in confidence. If the judgment about their performance is negative, it leads to a drop in confidence. In addition, in the process of assessing the amount of energy and attention needed, if the individual finds that the task requires more effort than originally thought, confidence and motivation also drop. The higher the confidence, the higher the performance, and vice versa.

As leaders, it's important to be aware of the natural progression in learning from basic to integrated to routine levels of knowledge as you assist your team in developing new skills. Understanding the development level continuum can boost your effectiveness with your people.

## About the Authors

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# End Notes

*Please refer to the following sources:*

1  *Skinner, 1953, 1968; Thorndike, 1913; Watson, 1924. In modern-day leadership, see Daniels and Rosen, 1986, Connellens, 1978, 1988.*

2  *Bruner, 1966; Kohlberg, 1965; Piaget, 1968, 1970.*

3  *Kohlberg, 1973; Loevinger, 1976; Brookfield, 1986; Candy, 1991; Knowles, et al., 1998; Gesell, 1946.*

4  *Kohlberg, 1973; Brookfield, 1986; Pratt, 1988; Candy, 1991; Grow, 1991; Knowles, et al., 1998. For examples of life-span literature, see Ericsson, 1959; Sheehy, 1975, 1995; Loevinger, 1967; Levinson, 1978, 1996; Brim and Kagan, 1980; and Demetriou, Doise, and Van Lieshout, 1998.*

5  *Argyris, 1957 1962; Vroom, 1964; Terborg, 1979; Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989; Winters and Latham, 1996; Bandura, 1997; and Zigarmi, et al., 2005.*

6  *Ackerman, Kyllonen, and Roberts, 2000; Bandura, 1996; Dweck, 1986; Elliot and Dweck, 2008; Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989; Locke and Latham, 1990; Nissen and Bullermer, 1987; Winter and Latham, 1996; Wood, Mento, and Block, 1987.*

7  *Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989.*

8  *Ackerman, 1987; Anderson, 1982, 1985; Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989.*

9  *Humphries, 1979.*

10  *Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989.*

11  *Fitts and Pozner, 1967; Anderson, 1982; Adams, 1987; and Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989.*

12  *Anderson, 1982, 1985; Kyllonen and Shute, 1989.*

13  *Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989.*

14  *Bandura, 1986, 1997.*

15  *The Four Theories Are Needs Theory, Reinforcement Theory, Equity Theory, and Expectancy Theory. See Monday, et al., 1990; Cook and Hunsaker, 2001.*

16  *Deci and Flaste, 1995; Deci and Ryan, 2002.*

17  *Kleiginna and Kleiginna, 1981.*

18  *Mathieu, Marineau, and Tannenbaum, 1993.*

19  *Bandura, 1986, 1997.*

20  *Gist, Schoerer, and Rosen, 1989; Gist, Stevens, and Bavetta, 1991; Eden and Ravid, 1982; Tannenbaum et al., 1991.*

21  *Ford, Quinones, Sego, and Sorra, 1992.*

22   *Mathieu, Marineau, and Tannenbaum, 1993.*

23  *Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989.*

24  *Ibid.*

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