

An Interview with Chris Cowan

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By Russ Volckmann, PhD, www.leadcoach.com

I had the good fortune to have a conversation with Chris Cowan, coauthor of [Spiral Dynamics](#) and of **Differential Management**. Here is an edited version of the complete interview.

RV: Developmental psychology seems to be in resurgence. **Spiral Dynamics** is a part of that. We have stage models and we also have ideas about the developmental process or path. This brings up the idea of vertical and horizontal development. How do you see these?

CC: In Gravesian theory, the original version, there are three forms of change. Category One is vertical and gives movement up the system of stages. That's the one most folks look for. That's the American "up by your boot straps" fantasy. Moving up the spiral is vertical. People are looking for an end state. They're looking for Nirvana or Maslovian self-actualization.

When we present the model to people especially who are around the fifth level, or Orange (ER) they always want to find out what is the top of the model and then put themselves there. There is this wonderful need for verticality and hierarchy because that mindset is based on comparison to others. They say, "Wherever you are I want to be better than you." They love vertical change. That's why it gets all the press.

What doesn't get such good press, and I'm glad you're talking about it, is Grave's Category Two. That is horizontal change. It is change within a system in which basic premises are fundamentally unchanged.

In a horizontal shift you increase the substance, content, capacities, competencies, and abilities at that level without trying to shift thinking at all. One of Claire's favorite lines was, "Dammit all, a person has a right to be who he is!" If you accept that perspective then there are interventions, whether they be coaching, training, performance enhancement or OD, that requires nothing more than a horizontal change. You take the person thinking and living as they are and enhance skill capacity and ability. That is a perfectly legit form of change.

RV: Would you say that's kind of like single loop learning, learning how to do what one already knows, better?

CC: In a Graves sense it's not learning how to do what you already know better, but it's continuing to think in the way that you are thinking about things. You don't change your paradigm. You may learn something totally new. I may learn how to repair a Toyota engine, but my thinking about mechanics will be fundamentally

unshifted. Then I learn how to work on a Honda engine. My thinking about mechanics may still be exactly the same, but I'm increasing my skills and competencies. My worldview and my sense of reality are the same. I am sending content to a container that's not shifting.

RV: How does that related to vertical and horizontal development?

CC: There are different forms of learning. Grave's approach has three: horizontal, vertical and oblique. In oblique people begin to acquire some characteristics of the thinking at a more complex level, but they're still centralized where they were.

An example of oblique is the government's efforts in TQM with dimming of the lights. They talk the talk but they never quite walk the walk. There was no real shift in worldview but they started using different language and changing the nametags on the doors.

Vertical requires a paradigm shift. Vertical change means that I am redefining my version of what the world is like. I'm redesigning my sense of reality. I'm looking at what is going on around me through a very different window than I was before.

In a horizontal shift I may be cleaning the window, but basically I'm working on what is going on inside the building. I'm not really looking out through the window very much at all. With oblique I'm polishing the window. I'm cleaning it. I may open it. With vertical, I've changed windows.

RV: Charles Hampton Turner set forth a model of psychosocial development. He wrote about vertical, upward development as a developmental process. He also described an alternative: a downward spiral. This is an anomic process, meaning that you have less and less power and capacity to influence along with a lowered sense of self.

CC: The same would apply in Grave's theory. Once you're talking vertical, it's a two way street. There's a connection between the perception of existential problems in the milieu and activated neurobiological equipment in the brain. With a shift in those perceived existential problems a person shifts gears to reactivate old neuropsychological equipment. This can result in movement that is either up or down. For example, in the U.S. is that we are in a regression. I think we're seeing a similar regression going on in Holland, Denmark at the moment; there has been a significant back shift.

A metaphor I use is to think of the Spiral model as like a gearbox. As one adds a new way of thinking, it's like clanking a new gear onto the cluster. It's possible to operate at one speed but there is more freedom having two speeds. There are more degrees of freedom by having three speeds, four speeds or more. When you add a new gear to the cluster you get more finesse and it easier to climb

some hills. You can't say that a six speed is inherently better than a four speed. It's a matter of what you're trying to do. There are more degrees of freedom with a six speed and it has more possibilities. You can shift amongst those gears, up or down, depending on what is going on in life. So a person with a six speed has more options both for down shift and up shift, than the person with only one or two speeds.

RV: You mentioned development as a national level phenomenon a moment ago...

CC: Graves' work began as a model of the individual mature personality in operation. That is what Graves' original work was all about.

RV: There is a part in the book that does pertain though, the part that is around the alpha, beta, gamma, delta?

CC: That pertains to the tracking of, what was in Graves' view, the sequence of change from one modal system to the next. Alpha is a point of stability, where the neurology matches the existential problem. Beta is where you have problems: some awareness of difficulty and incongruence. Gamma is the regressive search back to a previous state to check and see if it might work yet again. There is some turbulence, some labile functioning and so forth. Delta is the entering of the next level. We're still not stabilized and we are using new coping means to address a new level of existential problem. Then there will be a new alpha. Basically that's the pattern from any system to the next.

RV: So it is like a spiral staircase, in Graves' view? He talks about landings, for example.

CC: That is from **Differential Management**. I wrote that book in 1996 and there's some stuff in the book that I would not say now like the spiral staircase and the landings Graves was really not the staircase-landing guy at all. That would be confusing because it would turn the approach into a typology with categories. What it's supposed to be, for those who really get into the depth of it, is a whole bunch of parallel waves rolling. All you're doing is looking at the peak of a particular wave, but there are sub-carriers beneath it. You don't stop at a landing.

Some of the current discussion around the model really irritates me because people are treating it like it is eight categories. Those eight categories are only the hypothetical high water marks of these systems. Those are the pure tones, but most people are chords.

RV: Something powerful in Wilbur's work has been the notion of lines and streams. It suggests that there are many facets and aspects of the individual and those are dynamic. They flow up and down depending on external stimulus and

other factors. At any given point in time any snapshot you would take you would find the individual at different developmental levels. What is your reaction to that?

CC: I use a canoe trip metaphor for this. I talk about the current in a stream and how you can use that stream metaphor. There are multiple layers through a stream and different things going in sub-currents. You have the archetypal flotsam and jetsam on the surface. Then you have the behavior of the layered currents. At some level, and this is what the model is really about, you have those land forms underneath that are impacted by the erosion of the streams. The land forms change. That is the neurology, the genetics and so forth. At the same time those land forms that a person is born with influence the current and the behavior of that stream on top, so it's two way. They're reciprocally affecting each other.

The stream metaphor is a lovely metaphor. What doesn't work is the categories and the types. That's really an artificial contrivance. Any kind of a flowing metaphor can be useful, for example, the flow of light: the gentle shifts as you move through tonalities of light and blends of light. You can use sound waves or music.

RV: If the categories don't work, how do you differentiate? I'm assuming it is still valuable to differentiate different levels of development in different aspects of our being.

CC: There are several billion individual cases of human psyche to study and no one can do it all. We really don't have enough time. We have to use those generalities and glib stereotypes and that's what people talk about. Where I really get pretty bent is when somebody says, "Oh, there goes a four." Or, "There goes an orange. When you're dealing with oranges, here are the things you do with oranges."

It's nuts because developmental stages aren't kinds of people. These represent, in this theory at least, ways of thinking about a thing.

RV: This is the same issue I have with the labels and the boxes in applying MBTI and other assessments to people.

CC: Myers Briggs looks at temperament variables. Graves' theory isn't that. It doesn't correlate with temperament very well.

I don't like labeling and putting people into boxes, because (A) the person cannot be broken into one of these simple little types, (B) it denies change, and (C) it denies complexity.

Fundamental to our approach is that a person is able to think about different things and redefine the world contextually. I don't necessarily think about every

thing in my day in exactly the same way. A person can think about religion one way and think about deer hunting in another. There tends to be a pattern to it, but certainly not a lot.

RV: So, do you have a language for those patterns?

CC: I use the letter pairs and talk about someone who is in transition. I use the letters instead of the colors. I invented those stupid colors and there are only eight of them. There's no finesse to it. It was just built to paint title slides. There's nothing more to it.

It has become a language and it's a lousy language. Graves always used letters because each letter pair represents a system. It allows a little more finesse.

RV: In **Differential Management** you use the letter pairs to suggest that there is almost an infinite progression that can occur.

CC: Yes. Again, this is a break point between Graves and what Wilber and others are saying. The theory is open ended. It does not head toward some grand state of Aquarian enlightenment.

Graves started with Maslow and Maslow went to a point. Graves turned it over and said it ain't no point. On the contrary, there is an expansiveness. There's a broadening, a widening. In the widening there is an increase in conceptual space.

You have to turn the Maslow pyramid upside down to do a Graves pyramid. Rather than achieving transpersonal something or other, this model says "As soon as they think they have achieved transpersonal something or other, they're going to go "Oh, now there's something else." We're not going to reach that state of enlightened beinghood. Each state of enlightened beinghood just opens the door to the next state, whatever it is.

RV: The impression I have is that in the color coded spiral dynamics model, which I guess is easier for me to talk about, is that in this second stage you end up with the yellow and the turquoise, and then the coral, and I've even seen the coral represented as being one with God kind of notion, so....

CC: It's a lousy graphic.

RV: I'm not talking about the colors; I'm talking about the concept.

CC: It's the same thing. Coral will simply fade into a next and a next and a next. They continue on up, rather than saying "Oh, and there's the top!" That's horrible. It's deceitful. It's absolutely opposite to the Graves point of view. Some people who are playing with the model now are hot into the first tier, second tier stuff. It's

bullshit. It really is.

RV: It's just another boundary?

CC: It's just another boundary. Graves was never sure that it was a big deal.

Early in his research, the letter pairs were BO, CP, DQ, ER, FS, GT, HU, IV and so forth. This is just an alphabetic sequence. The reason he picked letters is that he couldn't find anything better. He had used Greek letters to represent the change states and he needed something to designate the levels. He split the alphabet in half so factor one was the first half of the alphabet and factor two was the second half.

He thought that development was totally wide open, simply a linear sequence. In his latter years he was never wholly sold on the idea. What he began to pick up in his research was that his seventh system (yellow) was the first of the being levels. He called the first six subsistence levels. The second set he called being levels. The idea of the first six was there was human adequacy; there was sufficiency. And it was a jump from the sixth to the seventh, green to yellow. Then you move to a scarcity base. The seventh level, the yellow, and the turquoise and so forth, are scarcity based.

In his research he found some pretty significant data about people who appeared to be centralized at the sixth and some at the seventh, between green and yellow. So there's more to this than meets the eye. As he looked at those cases, read their concepts and looked at his data, he noted that the first level is about survival: staying alive in the context of a world where there is enough to make do, but it is risky. He heard those at the yellow or seventh level talking about what he hypothesized first level would be thinking about, except they conceived of themselves as survivors in a global village, as opposed to survivors in the rainforest.

When he looked at the B prime, O prime (turquoise) folks, he began to hear a harmonic. What he hypothesized was that in the second level the purple shows up in the turquoise as tribalism again, except it is global tribalism. This is holarchic.

What if there is actually a symphony with six themes. It goes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, instead of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, etc. That's where the idea of tiers came up.

He was never convinced of this for sure but he said, "You know, it could well be that there are only six basic themes in human nature, and they just keep replaying up an octave each time." The first run through is those subsistence levels. That's beige through green. Then there would be a second run through of those same basic themes, building on top of the first one. You have the same music come back again but building over it. That would be the yellow, turquoise,

coral, malt...We haven't figured out what colors to use, we're thinking about aubergene and plum and a few others, with some really cool words for them so it will be hard to spell.

(Laughter)
RV: Ecrú.

CC: Ecrú would be a nice one. There are some really good ones. I don't know if you saw Saturday Night Live the other night, but the new color code they presented began with white, off white, eggshell...it was degrees of white.

What we have ----- is the six on six on six, and in some of his drawings he had done he showed it as A through F, AA through FF, double primes and triple primes.

RV: The first six are man getting his act together on earth, right?

CC: Well, not just on this earth. Some of the Aboriginal stuff is pretty cool, so it's not just on this earth.

RV: There was some universalistic shift in the second six, wasn't there?

CC: Every level builds upon what came before. The others are subsumed within.

RV: Can you conceptualize a third set?

CC: No, I can't get beyond turquoise. I read all this spiritual hyperbole. To me it's all extrapolations of the fifth and sixth levels. I laugh about the neo-Buddhist sheik stuff. It's really the fifth and sixth levels. It is moving out of the dogmatic doctrinaire stuff of DQ: that's Bible thumping Christianity and Islam and Judaism where you've got the holy book, the holy words and hierarchy. With the fifth level the individual is empowered, so you have this craving at the fifth level to break away from those authorities and have this raw, individual autonomous being where mind is the master.

In the jump to the sixth level my own right thinking mind that I seek to master and fulfill to the highest degree gets back in tune with other folks and the idea that there is a universe out there. There is also an energy field and this idea of oneness in a unity. But it's not a Bible thumping unity from DQ. It's cosmological unity at FS.

I'm not seeing a lot of transcendence beyond that. I've done a little bit of hanging out and watching Buddhist monks doing their thing. I'm not seeing—it might be my own blindness—folks doing a whole lot beyond that level. In fact what I'm seeing is an awful lot of struggling in that ER to FS transition. A few folks who are moving into GP. GP is about how we actually survive in the complexity of this

current age, not seeking to read it, control it and make a wonderful new world out of it. That's fifth level stuff.

The fifth level of human existence says we can make this a wonderful world of abundance and joy for all people. The sixth level says we'll have to do it as a team; we'll have to do it together in harmony, in consensus, in glorious spiritual oneness. That's sixth level stuff. I don't know what the heck turquoise stuff is.

Every ultimate pretension, I think. (Laughter) I see people doing their thing and it is healing and cool. Living physics and getting the idea of optidimensionality is cool. Integrating time, space and so forth with ones being, that's all cool.

Who is really doing it as opposed to talking about it? Can you show me some who are really doing it and living it? There are some. I'm not denying that there are some. But they're not real big into writing trade paperbacks. They're actually living it.

My market test is always any time somebody tells me they're yellow. I know they're actually orange. Any time they have to prove it to me, they are thereby proving it to themselves. That's the clearest evidence that I'm not dealing with someone at the seventh level and beyond.

RV: Aside from that kind of anecdotal evidence, do you have a way of assessing the developmental levels that people tend to congregate around?

CC: We have attempts to assess. Go to the Graves web site and you'll see some samples of the way Graves always said you had to do an assessment. Ask people what the world is like. You look at what they say and you watch how they behave.

It's amazing how many people talk grand metaphysical talk but they're still trying to pay off American Express and play competitive positioning games with other people. They're doing good old DQ, ER stuff, truly believing every word they say and fighting to get the truth out. So you sense by asking people.

I'm no master of it because it's hard to do, but the trick is to get folks to talk about things that are ego involving and important and then look beyond what they're saying at how they're saying it, the logic of it, the reasoning of it, and the world view it's reflecting. It's hard to do it. It's usually better done with more than one set of brains working on it.

RV: I know two people who are trying to use that strategy. I'm more familiar with one than the other. One is Otto Laske who has developed individual level and organizational level assessments. He really relies on trained analysts to score the results

CC: We've got assessments. We train people and show them how to use the

test. But it's really not a very valid assessment because it never gets down to the question of why did that person make those choices under these circumstances. I tell people that here is a conversation starter, a coaching tool. With large numbers of respondents it's going to give you a pretty darn good clue of what's going on in an organization. But you can't take it as an accurate read of some individual's tea leaves until you know were they lying, or not, were they telling you the truth, were they fooling themselves, fooling you?

RV: What their attitude was while they were answering.

CC: Yes. Did they want to do it? You have all those caveats thrown in. Graves never believed you could really do it with pencil and paper. He always did it with having people write and give statements. He correlated that with a bazillion other psychological measures to see if they all fit and they did. If you read Loevinger's **Ego Development** she talks about Graves and a lot of other models, You start pulling together a bunch of those assessment tools and you begin to get a picture.

RV: Susann Cook-Greuter has an instrument based partly on Loevinger's work and is called the Leadership Development Profile in which you do sentence completions. Then a trained person does an analysis from the point of view of the stages of development.

CC: That's a cleaner way to do it. In our instruments we are forcing semantic choices down people's throats until they have to play the odds. It is not authentic, clean. That only comes out of their brain. I like sentence completion better and you have to have those trained readers. I would say she's right on target.

RV: Would you summarize how you're using Spiral Dynamics with leaders in business and organizations?

CC: I show them that different people respond to different leaders, leadership styles and strategies. You have to build in a leadership system that first matches where followers are and then stretches about half a notch ahead of that so they have something to follow as opposed to something to match.

RV: How is it a leadership "system."

CC: We build a whole coherent system, because it's a leader-follower system dynamic. When you're looking at organizations you have to do multiple little sub-spirals and think: what's the management philosophy; what's the purpose; what's the individual competency package of this 'leader' person; what's the nature of this follower; what's the nature of the past they're trying to glue together?

RV: I start with the assumption that leadership is a function that exists anywhere in the organization. If you want to create change in your organization then one

thing you have to do is start with the executive leadership. The executive leadership can be considered at the very least a leadership sub-system, if not a leadership system in its own right. That leadership system among executives is one that involves development at the individual level as well as the collective level. Does your approach involve thinking in those terms?

CC: Leadership functions exist throughout an organization. You have to develop them where the work is done and where the work is facilitated. We need to ask what are we doing here, and why, and how are we going to be doing it next, and why? All of those things have to be massaged and intertwined. Leadership is about how to do that.

Spiral Dynamics acknowledges that folks expect and need different things from the persons they're working with. So we draw out different kinds of management/leadership systems. We ask, what's the nature of their work environment; what's the nature of the workplace; what's the nature of how they communicate; what's the nature of things that motivate or demotivate? You have to create a system where, since you're going to have a mix of human beings, you will keep them all reasonably comfortable, reasonably productive, not going nuts and continue to grow.

RV: How are you working with leaders?

CC: All I do is little bits of training here and there and sit down and chat with them. We don't have a huge consulting practice at all. We do writings and trainings. We just sit down with folks and show them the stuff and listen to what they're trying to do.

One guy in Holland ran a string of health care facilities. He was put into the position of being managing director to create culture change. He was mandated to be a change leader. We sat with him and explored what he could do. How can he lead given the nature of the people he's got. We asked him, "What's the nature of your people? What's the nature of the existence problems they're confronting? What are the realities of what they might and might not be able to do?" You have to be reality based and focus on what is feasible. How can everyone get that incremental 10% improvement where everybody is happier?

That's all I know to do with people. We just sit with them, listen to the problem and try to analyze the problem. We try to leave them with a tool so that when they go about their business they can apply it and then come back with email or phone calls and say, "Help! That didn't make sense!" or "We agreed to this and this was stupid. What are some alternatives?"

RV: Since you co-wrote **Spiral Dynamics** has your model of leadership changed?

CC: I've learned a lot more about Graves' theories since then. I have loosened up. I was a little more on the yellow soapbox, than I have become of late. I think there is an awful lot of strength throughout all the systems and so the idea of trying to grow people is more and more anathema to me. I like the idea of letting people find congruence where they are. They can do some horizontal change and open the doors for them to make vertical shifts if they want to and as they can. We cannot mandate it, enforce it or to be quite so strong in pushing it.

It's not an 'everybody's beautiful' thing. People don't change until they acknowledge more complex existence. You may change their lingo and you may change some of their behaviors. You can certainly adjust some of what they're doing.

While they're doing it their fundamental being isn't going to shift any. I've gotten away from that pretense: pretending I was going to change who people are. Now I just worry about how can they do better? How can they be of use? How can their little 75-80 years be better years? And enjoy them.

RV: That's the spirit in which I work with a leadership hierarchy that starts at where are you trying to go? I characterize that as strategic objectives, business objectives: those that are short term; they're not highly visionary or any of that, although they may be derived from that. Then I ask the question as a collective, what is your leadership purpose? By defining your purpose you establish the definition of your leadership group.

Still at the collective level, what are the leadership resources that are required to implement your purpose and that in effect gives you the impetus for creating a leadership organization within your company. This is still focused on the executive level.

Next, in order to realize your purpose and achieve your objectives and utilize your resources effectively, sometimes the linear dynamics of organization don't work very well and you've got to shift nonlinear stuff among the executives. This is about change and involves teamwork. They've got to get inspired as a team. Ultimately, collectively as a set of leaders, they create a vital enterprise. This involves taking what they have built among themselves as executive leaders and engaging with stakeholders from that place. All of that is in support of trying to achieve those business objectives.

CC: You began with the right question, which is, "What business are you in? What's your purpose here? What are you doing?"

RV: At the individual level, corresponding to leadership purpose is commitment and membership in the group. Corresponding to resources is competence and being a contributor to the organization. Corresponding to inspired teamwork is capacity for innovation as a team player. And corresponding to the vital

enterprise is importance of connection to stakeholders as an entrepreneur in the service of the business objectives.

CC: Cool.

RV: That's what I mean about a structural kind of arrangement, where I think that spiral dynamics has something to say about how people work those issues. I haven't put that together yet, but it's intriguing.

CC: You've nailed what it really does. Spiral dynamics is a descriptive, not a prescriptive thing. When I say Spiral Dynamics I mean Graves' work. All the talk about Spiral Dynamics is just relabeling Graves' ideas. These ideas are not novel; they're just his stuff carried forward in large measure.

RV: At a meeting recently someone talked about issues around the application of integral perspectives and I basically affirmed what the person was saying: "As long as you're descriptive, you're okay, but as soon as you start getting prescriptive, you're in trouble."

(Laughter)

CC: I tell people it gives them scaffolding for a business. It lets them put up a platform to surround the structure. They can climb all over this platform and look at it from different angles. They can chip, nick, repair and change the rocks and so forth, but this model basically is that scaffolding and not the structure. They've got to have a set of tools in hand when they climb up on the scaffolding. There's nothing there waiting for them, so they've got to have Myers-Briggs, leadership models, and all that stuff...

RV: Emotional intelligence?

CC: Yes, emotional intelligence and all that...you name it, whatever. They can have anything they want in terms of tools, because this basically lays out a better way to pick which tools to use, when and where. It lets them have a clearer picture of this building. My fantasy is that it is a better picture of what to do and also what not to do. I think its part of the hype that sometimes surrounds this spiral stuff, that it is more than it is. It is both more than it is and less than it is. People are looking for answers that this does not pretend to offer. This began as a question of studying the nature of human nature and how it changes.

RV: And what I get from you is that it's an excellent way of creating a descriptive window, to create meaning out of what you're experiencing and what you're seeing. As soon as you turn it into something that says you really ought to want to be yellow, or something like that, then you've fallen off into the abyss of prescriptive morality.

CC: That's precisely it. There's been a lot of that going on with this stuff lately.

That is anathema to understanding the point of view. The point of view fundamentally is, you can't do that. People aren't going to change until they're ready for change. You don't, you can't change them. They can change, but you can't change them. So all the talk about uplifting them and trying to yellow-ize them and make them into the second tier shows a fundamental misunderstanding of this model.

RV: Well, on that note, I want to thank you very much, and tell you this has been really helpful to me.

CC: Thank you.