
Understanding Life Cycle Stages: *Principles and Examples*

By
Mitch Saunders

Why a Developmental Perspective?

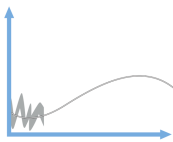
Living systems have beginnings, confront dilemmas as they evolve and mature, and eventually die. Instead of trying to force an external solution on a partially recognized problem, you can choose to influence, guide, and cooperate with what is happening now. Accurately locating your position along the life cycle continuum is integral to this process, because it informs you of the unique challenges and opportunities that are more readily perceived with a developmental perspective.

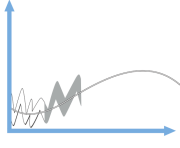
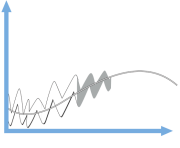
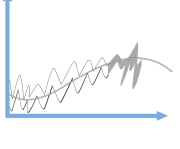
Each stage is in tension with other stages. As you recognize the purpose or function of a system's efforts to deal with change—and the underlying impulses that are forming them—you become well positioned to influence what is taking shape. Awareness of what will happen next prepares you for more reliable future action.

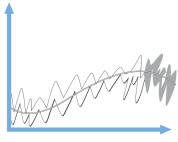
Understanding the life-cycle

Adaptive responses common to individuals and organizations correlate with distinct stages of development. What follows are examples of typical responses mapped to predictable stages.

An Inflection Point in the life cycle represents a dramatic and disruptive change in course rather than a predictable transition. Characteristics of the Inflection Point (which can occur at any stage in the life cycle) are described at the end of this paper.

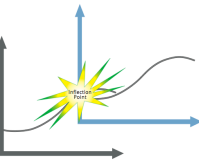
Stage In The Life Cycle	Characteristics	Individual Responses	Organizational Responses
Inception & Incubation: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inspiration• Ideas unformed or “half-baked”• Search for direction and possibilities• Sense potential and urgency but not clarity about how ideas will be realized• Fragile concepts in need of a container or protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask for help to clarify vague or ambiguous desires and translate them into a clear aspiration, vision or goal• Reach out and search for new influences, mentors and safe places to experiment with new ways of being• Spend time with trusted friends and allies who will support a major change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pioneers set aside time and energy for something new to develop• Try to obtain resources and safe space to pursue invention• Gather others with common interests to help• Create functions similar to “skunk works”, greenhouse or incubator

Stage In The Life Cycle	Characteristics	Individual Responses	Organizational Responses
<p>Early Development:</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus intensively on search for viable patterns • Hyperactive with frequent shifts of attention • Little or no coordination of effort • Lots of space to pursue opportunities • Mistakes tolerated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try out different kinds of relationships and jobs • Form and negotiate relationships and partnerships that support the new direction and vision • Create and work through a plan • Trial and error learning • Frequent identity change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather resources • Everyone pitches in to do whatever it takes • Create a new product development roadmap • Search for “game-changing” innovations • Invest in multiple possibilities to get one or more “solutions” that work • Experimentation and prototyping (good enough for market launch) • Product or service launch
<p>Growth and Expansion</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus primarily on growth and effectiveness • Specialize, and segment • Limit opportunities for directional change • Organize repetitive tasks and define roles • Experience frequent tension and conflict • Merge disparate contributions into coherent wholes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define signature approach • Cultivate voice or sense of authority • Teach others how to participate and help • Exploit existing relationships and networks in ways to support new growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search for sustainable business model and/or a scalable product architecture • Define and replicate model • Cultivate new sources of revenue, and expanded capacity • Increase speed, reduce defects, streamline • Improve customer experience • Acquire or joint venture to gain new customers, technology or skill sets
<p>Maturation:</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce routine and rigid patterns • Refine what already exists • Adhere to the tried and true • Preserve efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for subtle ways to “play smarter” • Shed activities or relationships perceived as peripheral or discretionary • Create or reinforce legacy • Mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retain customers, employees, and leverage supply chain relationships • Consolidate functions and business units • Acquire and merge to solidify market positions • Outsource

Stage In The Life Cycle	Characteristics	Individual Responses	Organizational Responses
Decline: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be preoccupied with survival • Intense commoditization • Slow pace • Curb appetite for movement or creativity • Limit activity as energy unavailable to get things done • Sense ending imminent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search for alternative jobs, relationships • Create distance between oneself and a familiar endeavor • Move out of roles associated with being a “leader” or “producer” • Take steps to end a job or relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redistribute power, resources and responsibility • Reinforce power bases of individuals or sub-groups • Talent leaves • Lay offs • Sell off assets

An Inflection Point in the life cycle represents a disruptive shift and end of the line. Something new and untested is struggling to emerge. Survival will require a “game-change”. What follows are characteristics of the Inflection Point (which can occur at any stage in the life cycle).

The Inflection Point

Stage In The Life Cycle	Characteristics	Individual Responses	Organizational Responses
Inflection Point: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face unprecedented demands or opportunities • Questions and dilemmas can't be resolved at current level of complexity or functioning • No clear path forward but change is necessary • Unprepared for a changing reality—disorientation • Diverse stakeholders advocate competing problem definitions and solutions • Preoccupied with survival <i>and</i> the need for something “game-changing” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time to pause, reflect, and refocus • Question historic patterns of relating, leadership, problem solving or self-care • Establish a safe place to develop new response patterns • Form a group or alternative support system to help withstand the pressure to conform with mainstream thinking and acting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess and examine need for dramatic change at the level of strategy, business model, product and organizational architecture or culture • Investigate the ways in which society's needs may be changing • Explore what's emerging (at the periphery of the current business and/or in seemingly unrelated sectors) • Form a “Tiger Team” to discover and develop a new business model, offering, and/or uncontested market segment

For more about the inflection point, please download *Leadership at the Inflection Point* at: <http://www.actionlearninglabs.com/wp-content/pdf/leadership-at-the-inflection-point.pdf>