

W I L L I A M C R A W E C O N S U L T I N G

THE RAWE ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

A Developmental Approach to Executive Leadership in Complex Organizations

Version 3.3

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C O N F I D E N T I A L A N D P R O P R I E T A R Y

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Abstract

The leadership development industry continues to spend billions on programs that fail to produce lasting change. This paper argues that the underlying problem is not poor execution but inadequate theoretical foundations. Most leadership development addresses only the skills, knowledge, and behaviors of leaders—what can be called horizontal capability—while ignoring the developmental structure through which leaders make meaning. The Rawe Adaptive Leadership Framework (RALF) is a synthesizing model that integrates constructive developmental theory (CDT), complexity leadership theory (CLT), adaptive leadership scholarship, reflective and reflexive practice, and original empirical findings from a 2024 qualitative study of human resource development professionals into a unified approach to executive and organizational development.

RALF identifies three interdependent dimensions of leadership development—vertical capacity, horizontal capability, and reflexive practice—five adaptive capacities through which developmental growth becomes observable in leadership behavior, seven facets of developmental structure through which assessment is anchored, and a four-phase developmental process loop through which growth is actively cultivated. The framework provides a defensible theoretical foundation for executive coaching, team development, and organizational consulting, and is operationalized through the Leadership Complexity Inventory (LCI™) — a proprietary developmental assessment that identifies where a leader currently operates within the RALF developmental architecture and where the gap exists between their current developmental zone and the complexity demands of their role. The LCI™ is in active psychometric validation.

Version 3.3 of this document integrates all prior revisions, adds explicit subject-object mappings and illustrative vignettes, strengthens the assessment architecture with interim safeguards and integration guidance, provides suggested research designs for all testable propositions, and articulates limitations and boundary conditions in accordance with responsible evidence-based practice. Version 3.3 additionally standardizes entity and version designations, incorporates the Part A validity-screening and provisional-zone safeguards from the LCI™ Scoring Manual, corrects figure numbering, and aligns all assessment language with the zone-estimate claims discipline governing the pilot phase.

1. The Leadership Development Paradox

Leadership development is a global industry with credible spending estimates in the tens of billions of dollars annually, and it continues to grow. It is also, by its own measures, a substantially unsuccessful one. Multi-source studies consistently report that between half and three-quarters of leadership development programs fail to produce sustained behavioral change (Beer, Finnström, & Schrader, 2016; Gurdjian, Halbeisen, & Lane, 2014). Executives complete programs, return to work, and within weeks or months revert to the patterns the programs were designed to change.

The conventional response treats this as an execution problem: better content, more engaging delivery, longer programs, and stronger follow-up. The evidence, however, suggests that the failure is structural rather than tactical. Most leadership development teaches new skills to leaders whose underlying meaning-making systems cannot reliably support those skills under pressure. As Kegan and Lahey demonstrated across decades of applied research, this is the difference between adding new content to a leader's container and changing the container itself.

The post-pandemic leadership environment has intensified the problem. The work of leadership has shifted from coordinating predictable processes to navigating sustained ambiguity, distributed teams, accelerated change, and stakeholder demands for competing forms of legitimacy. Research conducted by Rawe (2024) through analysis of human resource development practitioners' lived experience found that this environment calls for leaders capable of adaptive customization, reflexive self-awareness, multi-generational responsiveness, holistic development, and a fundamentally servant orientation to influence. These are not, in the main, skills problems. They are developmental ones.

Why do some leaders with less tenure consistently outperform veterans in volatile, ambiguous settings? The answer is not experience or technical skill—it is developmental order. Mental complexity, not chronological seniority, predicts adaptive capacity under conditions that require genuine meaning-making revision.

— The RALF Anomaly

This paper presents the Rawe Adaptive Leadership Framework—RALF—as a research-grounded response to this paradox. It is not a new theory of adult development; it is an applied synthesis that integrates five established scholarly traditions with original empirical findings to produce a framework that is theoretically coherent, practically deployable, and empirically testable.

2. Theoretical Foundations

RALF is an applied synthesis that draws on five established research traditions and one original empirical contribution. Each tradition is briefly reviewed here; readers seeking fuller treatment should consult the primary sources cited.

2.1 Constructive Developmental Theory

Constructive developmental theory (Piaget, 1932; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Cook-Greuter, 1999; Torbert, 2004) posits that adults continue to develop in qualitatively distinct ways across the lifespan, growing through structures of meaning-making characterized by progressively greater complexity, perspective-taking capacity, and self-revision. The theory's foundational claim is that it is not what we know but the "order" of mind from which we know it that determines how we engage the world.

Kegan's contribution—the subject-object distinction, in which what a person is subject to at one stage becomes object at the next—is the single most operationally useful concept in adult developmental work. What a leader is "subject to" they cannot see, examine, or manage; it has them. What becomes "object" they can reflect upon, hold, and deliberately work with. Growth is the progressive expansion of what can be held as object. This mechanism is the load-bearing structure of RALF and must be preserved underneath every applied translation.

2.2 Adult Ego Development Research

Adult ego development research (Loevinger, 1976; Cook-Greuter, 1999) has produced complementary stage models with extensive empirical validation, including instruments such as the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT) and the Maturity Assessment Profile (MAP). This tradition provides quantitative grounding for the claim that developmental stages can be reliably assessed, not merely described. It also establishes the research precedent and methodological template for sentence completion methodology—the basis for Part B (Leadership Sentence Completion) of the Leadership Complexity Inventory. Critically, the psychometric properties of these validated predecessors (SOI inter-rater reliability typically .75–.90; WUSCT test-retest ~.82) inform the LCI™ validation targets and the conservative claims made during its current pilot phase.

2.3 Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) addresses what leadership must be in environments characterized by interdependent, dynamic, and emergent organizational systems. Three functions of leadership are distinguished: administrative (managing structures and processes), adaptive (enabling change and innovation), and enabling (creating conditions for adaptive leadership to operate). RALF draws on this framework to articulate the organizational-level application of developmental principles—specifically, the claim that organizational adaptive capacity is a function of the collective developmental order of its leadership, not merely its structural design.

2.4 Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) distinguishes between technical problems—for which expertise can produce solutions—and adaptive challenges, which require those affected to change values, beliefs, or behavior. This distinction is essential to RALF: most leadership development sells technical solutions to what are, in fact, adaptive problems.

Adaptive work cannot be delivered to followers; it must be done by them, and it is the leader's function to create the conditions in which that work can occur.

The critical theoretical connection is this: the capacity to lead adaptive work reliably—not episodically—requires a developmental platform of Self-Authoring mind or higher. A leader operating from a Socialized Mind can execute an adaptive change that someone else has designed; they cannot originate one when the group they lead is the source of resistance. This is not a competency claim. It is a structural claim about the meaning-making architecture required for the task.

2.5 Reflective and Reflexive Practice

Reflective and reflexive practice scholarship (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Cunliffe, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2009) addresses the active mechanism by which developmental change occurs. The distinction between single-loop learning (changing behavior within existing premises) and double-loop learning (examining and revising the premises themselves) maps directly onto the difference between horizontal capability acquisition and vertical capacity development. Reflexive practice—the capacity to examine one's own meaning-making in real time—is the bridge between the two and is deliberately cultivated in the Disrupt and Design phases of the RALF process loop.

Research into self-protective developmental patterns, including Kegan and Lahey's work on competing commitments and immunity to change, has been foundational in understanding why even motivated leaders fail to enact their stated intentions. RALF's operationalization of this mechanism is the Structural Growth Map (SGM™), a proprietary William C. Rawe Consulting diagnostic instrument that draws on this scholarly tradition while employing original terminology and a five-element architecture grounded explicitly in subject-object theory. The SGM provides the diagnostic structure for the Disrupt phase; its five elements—the Growth Horizon, Constraint Pattern, Structural Anchor, Load-Bearing Assumption, and Growth Experiment—are described fully in Section 8.7.

2.6 Original Empirical Contribution: The Rawe (2024) Dissertation

The Rawe (2024) doctoral dissertation—a qualitative descriptive study of human resource development professionals' lived experience designing and facilitating leadership development programs in the post-pandemic environment—generated eight thematic findings from analysis of eight interviews and a focus group using reflexive thematic analysis. These themes are the empirical floor on which RALF's applied architecture rests.

A key limitation of this foundation warrants explicit acknowledgment: the study drew from U.S. real estate industry HRD professionals, a narrow occupational and sectoral sample. Broader industry and cultural replication is required before the dissertation themes can be claimed as universal. RALF treats them as directionally informing, not definitively establishing, its applied design choices.

Table 1. The Eight Dissertation Themes and Their Connection to RALF

Dissertation Theme	Key Sub-Finding	RALF Connection
Leadership Development Approaches	Democratization, customization by generation/career stage, tech integration	Phase 0 calibration; multi-generational DLC design
Assessment and Culture	Balanced assessment; adaptive culture; upward leadership	LCI™ assessment architecture; organizational climate module
Clear Objectives and Impact	Goal clarity; people-centric focus; remote intentionality	Explicit outcome contracting; Demonstrate phase measurement
Leadership Competencies and Learning	Coaching/mentorship; holistic development; learner co-design	RETE coaching architecture; learner co-design in Design phase
Relationships and Recognition	Intentional relationship-building; celebrating success	Holding environment design; peer sponsorship in DLC
Leadership Competencies and Growth	Career development integration; individualized approach	RETE individualization; IDPs in Demonstrate phase
Interpersonal Dynamics and Influence	Generational etiquette; serving others	Servant leadership orientation; multi-generational facet scoring
Addressing Organizational Deficiencies	Addressing skill gaps; shifting LDP focus to individual learner	Phase 0 adaptive/technical distinction; LDP consulting mode

3. Developmental Levels in the RALF Architecture

RALF is grounded in Kegan's identification of qualitatively distinct stages of adult meaning-making, each representing a more complex epistemological structure. The mechanism of growth is the subject-object shift: what a person is subject to at one stage—invisible, unreflectable, identified with—becomes object at the next: visible, examinable, held rather than held by.

The diagnostic question that preserves theoretical precision at every level is: what is this leader unable to see because they are still inside it? This question must anchor both assessment and coaching conversation design.

— RALF Assessment Principle

For practical application in leadership contexts, RALF translates Kegan's epistemological constructs into leadership-behavior language. This translation gains practical traction but requires care: Kegan is making a claim about how meaning is made; RALF is making a claim about what someone does as a result. The subject-object logic must be preserved underneath the labels, or the model flattens into a personality typology—exactly what CDT was designed to escape.

RALF positions Level 4 (Principled Architect / Self-Authoring Mind) as the working threshold for adaptive leadership—the developmental platform from which senior executive work can be fully engaged. Level 5 is a direction of growth, not a credential. A framework that treats Level 5 as the primary destination will mostly produce performative humility among Level 4 leaders who have learned to sound integrative.

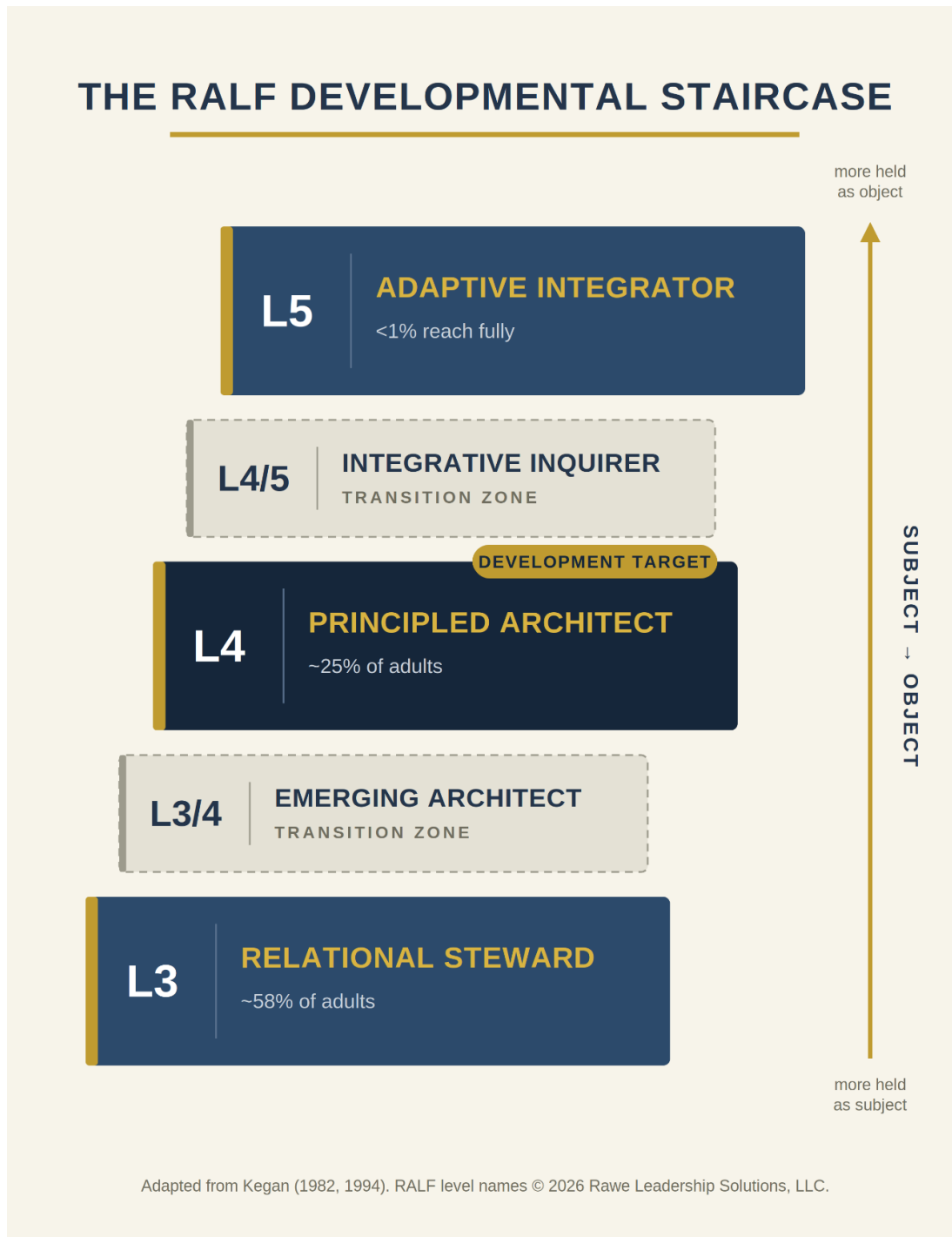


Figure 1. The RALF Developmental Staircase. Levels are arranged in order of increasing complexity of meaning-making. Transitional zones (L3/4, L4/5) mark periods of active developmental reorganization. L4 is the working threshold for adaptive leadership.

Table 2. RALF Developmental Levels: Translation from Kegan's Orders to Leadership Behavior

RALF Level	Kegan Order	RALF Name	Core Leadership Signature	Development Edge
L3	Socialized Mind	Relational Steward	Executes designed change; aligns with group norms; maintains harmony	Cannot originate change the group resists; struggles to give candid feedback
L3/4	Transitional	Emerging Architect	Oscillates between external and internal authority; increased friction with status quo	Inconsistent under pressure; prime zone for RALF intervention
L4	Self-Authoring Mind	Principled Architect	Authors strategy from internal compass; holds conviction under pressure; gives candid feedback	Can overidentify with own system; may resist frameworks that challenge core ideology
L4/5	Transitional	Integrative Inquirer	Beginning to examine one's own framework as object; seeks dialectical engagement	Integrative capacity inconsistent; can appear indecisive when holding genuine paradox
L5	Self-Transforming Mind	Adaptive Integrator	Coordinates multiple self-authored systems; revises own theory in real time; native with paradox	Rare in organizational settings (<1%); direction of growth, not program target

3.1 Subject-Object Mappings Across RALF Levels and Facets

The following table makes the subject-object mechanics explicit across levels and facets. This precision is required to prevent assessment from flattening into personality scoring. Every facet score should be anchored to what the leader is still subject to, not merely to what behavior they display. Growth is always defined as expansion of what can be held as object.

Table 2a. Subject-Object Mappings Across RALF Levels

RALF Level	Core Subject-Object Shift (Kegan)	Key Facet Manifestations	Leadership Implication
L3 Relational Steward	Subject to others' expectations, ideology, or group norms; self is defined by relational context	Locus of Authority: external/reference group. Identity Coherence: destabilized by disapproval. Perspective Coordination: identifies with present view.	Executes designed change; protects group harmony; cannot originate change the group resists
L4 Principled Architect	Self-authored ideology/framework becomes object; can coordinate others' perspectives within own system	Locus of Authority: internal examined reasoning. Relationship to Own Framework: visible and revisable. Identity Coherence: stable under external pressure when reasoning is sound.	Designs systems and strategy; holds conviction under social pressure; minimum platform for originating adaptive leadership
L5 Adaptive Integrator	Own frameworks and self held as provisional objects; can coordinate multiple self-authored systems	Tolerance for Paradox: holds irreducible tensions without collapse. Meaning-Making about Feedback: data against internal standards examined critically.	Revises own theory in real time; native comfort with complexity and multiple valid systems; direction of growth for L4 leaders

3.2 Illustrative Vignettes (Anonymized Composite Cases)

The following vignettes illustrate the subject-object mechanism in applied practice. They are composite cases from developmental coaching contexts and are presented to anchor the theoretical levels in observable leader behavior. They do not constitute outcome data.

Vignette 1: L3 → L4 Transition (Most Common Organizational Trigger)

A director of operations ("Alex") consistently seeks consensus before any decision and experiences intense anxiety when peers or direct reports disagree with a proposed change. In the SGM session, Alex's Structural Anchor is named: the current meaning-making structure is anchored to the equation "I am the leader others approve of." The Load-Bearing Assumption surfaces as: "If I take a clear position that others dislike, I will lose my identity as the collaborative leader everyone respects." The Growth Experiment is stating a reasoned position in one low-stakes meeting without immediate retreat or apology. The holding environment—executive coach plus supportive sponsor—confirms Alex's relational strengths while contradicting the assumption that differentiation equals betrayal. Over three iterations of the four-phase loop, Alex reports greater internal stability and begins originating adaptive process changes that initially met resistance but ultimately improved cross-functional outcomes.

The structural observation: Alex was subject to the equation "I = the leader others approve of." Through the loop, this equation became object—something Alex could examine rather than be. Differentiation became a choice, not a threat.

Vignette 2: Holding Environment Design (L3 → L4)

A newly promoted VP ("Jordan") freezes when former peers now report to them and avoids difficult performance conversations. The coach designs a holding environment that (1) confirms Jordan's loyalty and relational skill as genuine strengths, (2) introduces sustained, low-stakes demand to differentiate (e.g., giving one piece of developmental feedback per week using a structured protocol), and (3) provides continuity via a peer advisory group of other transitioning leaders. Jordan's meaning-making reorganizes: relationships shift from "I am defined by being liked" to "I choose to invest in others' growth from my own examined principles." Performance conversations become more direct and developmentally oriented.

The structural observation: the holding environment must simultaneously confirm the current structure's genuine capacities and introduce a calibrated demand that the current structure cannot meet without developing. Too little challenge produces comfort; too much challenge produces regression or shutdown.

3.3 The In-Between States: Developmental Transitions

Developmental transitions (the 3/4 and 4/5 zones in RALF) are not deficits; they are periods of active reorganization. Leaders in transition characteristically exhibit oscillating behavior—episodic access to the emerging structure alternating with regression to the prior one, particularly under stress. This oscillation is not inconsistency of character; it is the signature of development in progress.

Coaching during transitions requires specific design: the holding environment must neither confirm the old structure as adequate nor demand the new structure before it is consolidated. The four-phase loop is designed to provide this calibrated challenge-support gradient.

A critical practical note: leaders under acute pressure, exhaustion, or trauma activation may temporarily regress to earlier meaning-making structures regardless of their assessed developmental zone. RALF interventions must account for this by distinguishing developmental regression from developmental level. The LCI™ assesses center of gravity, not ceiling performance.

3.4 Holding Environments

The holding environment construct originates in Winnicott's (1965) developmental psychology and was adapted to adult development by Kegan (1982): a relational and structural context that simultaneously confirms the person's current capacities, contradicts the limits of the current meaning-making structure, and provides continuity of care while reorganization occurs. In RALF, holding environment design is the primary intervention mechanism of the four-phase loop; miscalibration in either direction is the most common cause of failed developmental work.

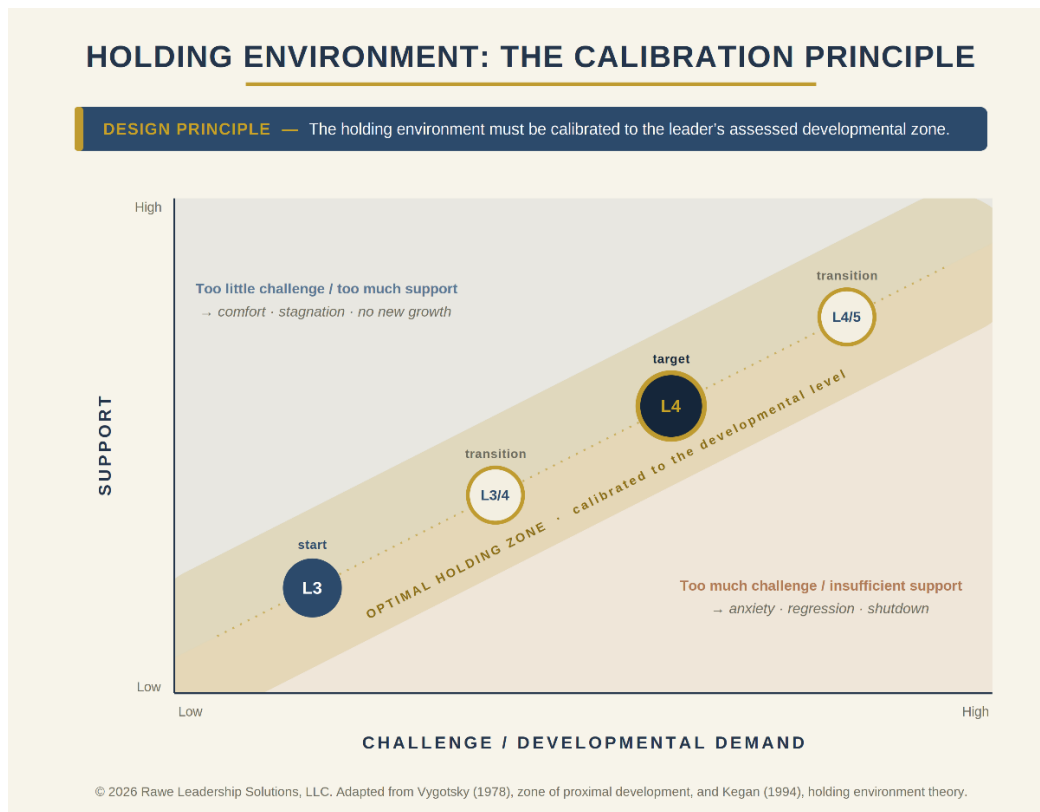


Figure 2. The Holding Environment Calibration Principle. Developmental growth requires a holding environment calibrated to the leader's current zone — sufficient support to attempt new behavior, sufficient challenge to make the current structure inadequate.

Table 3. Holding Environment Design Principles Across RALF Levels

RALF Level	What Must Be Confirmed	What Must Be Challenged	Risk If Miscalibrated
L3 Relational Steward	Relational skill, loyalty, collaborative strength	Equation of differentiation with betrayal	Too much challenge → shutdown; too little → stagnation in approval-seeking
L3/4 Transition	Both relational capacity and emerging independence	Inconsistency tolerated but gently confronted	Oscillation may be mistaken for resistance or unreliability
L4 Principled Architect	Internal compass, principled conviction	Over-identification with own framework; ideology as ceiling	Confirmation without challenge → ideology calcification
L4/5 Transition	Genuine integrative inquiry; comfort with not knowing	Performative humility; premature relativism	System may reward apparent L5 behavior without structural shift

4. The Three Developmental Dimensions

RALF organizes leadership development around three interdependent dimensions. These are not separate programs or modules; they are simultaneous, interacting domains of development. Genuine growth requires movement across all three.

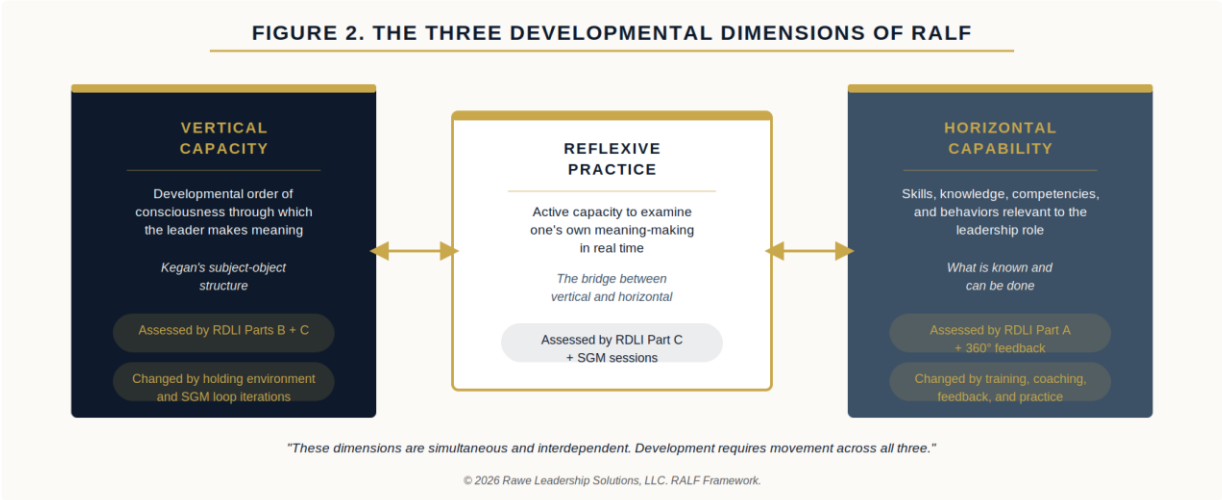


Figure 3. The Three Developmental Dimensions of RALF. Vertical Capacity, Horizontal Capability, and Reflexive Practice are simultaneous and interdependent. Development requires movement across all three dimensions; none is sufficient alone.

Table 4. The Three Developmental Dimensions of RALF

Dimension	Definition	Assessment Focus	Development Mechanism
Vertical Capacity	3	LCI™ Parts B and C; developmental zone scoring across seven facets	Subject-object shift through holding environment, SGM-guided Structural Anchor and Load-Bearing Assumption work, and iterative loop cycles
Horizontal Capability	The specific skills, knowledge, competencies, and behaviors relevant to the leadership role. What is known and can be done.	LCI™ Part A (DII subscales); 360° feedback; competency inventories	Training, coaching, feedback, practice, and structured experience. Effective only when the vertical container can support the skill.
Reflexive Practice	The active capacity to examine one's own meaning-making in real time—the bridge between vertical and horizontal.	LCI™ Part C (CIR); coaching conversation analysis; reflective journaling	Deliberate double-loop inquiry practices; SGM-guided Structural Anchor identification; structured reflection protocols

5. The Five Adaptive Capacities

The five adaptive capacities are the behavioral expressions through which developmental growth becomes observable in leadership practice. They were derived from cross-referencing the eight dissertation themes with established CDT behavioral signatures. Each capacity has a measurable behavioral expression and a developmental driver—the vertical shift that makes reliable enactment possible.

Table 5. The Five Adaptive Capacities

Adaptive Capacity	Definition	Behavioral Expression	Developmental Driver
Adaptive Customization	Flexing approach to context without losing principled consistency	Differentiates development approach by individual, generation, and career stage	Requires L4 internal compass to customize without losing self
Reflexive Self-Awareness	Real-time examination of one's own meaning-making assumptions	Names own assumptions in coaching; interrupts default patterns in real time	Requires subject-object shift: own assumptions must be object, not invisible driver
Multi-Generational Responsiveness	Reading and responding to developmental and contextual variation across generations	Adjusts communication, recognition, and development investments by generational context	Requires L4 perspective coordination without losing own position
Holistic Development Orientation	Investment in others' growth as a structural commitment, not a performance	Creates genuine holding environments; invests in successors beyond own tenure	Requires L4: others' growth must not threaten leader's identity or position
Servant Orientation	Influence exercised in service of others' and the organization's growth, not ego maintenance	Decisions visibly weighted toward follower and organizational benefit; power held lightly	Requires L4 secure identity independent of positional authority validation

6. The Four-Phase Developmental Process Loop

The four-phase developmental process loop is RALF's mechanism for translating assessment findings into developmental outcomes. It is not a linear sequence executed once; it is a recursive loop in which each completed cycle begins from a more developed platform. The loop governs both individual coaching engagements (RETE) and group cohort programs (DLC).

Phase 0—the organizational entry diagnostic—precedes and enables the loop. Without it, loop entry is calibrated to an assumed rather than an assessed developmental position. Phase 0 is not optional; it is the variable that most leadership development programs omit.

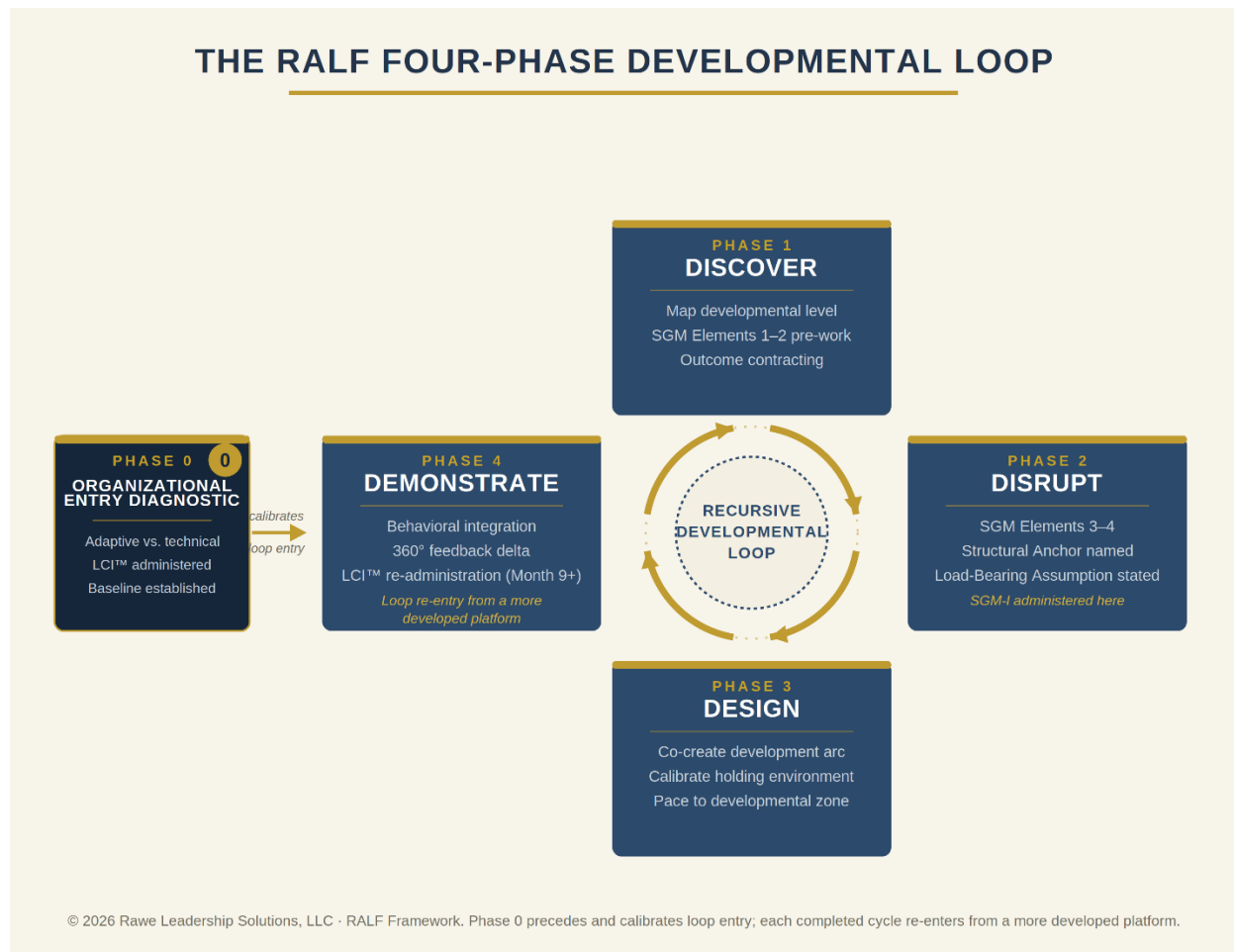


Figure 4. The RALF Four-Phase Developmental Loop. Phase 0 (organizational entry diagnostic) precedes and calibrates loop entry. The loop is recursive: each completed cycle begins from a more developed platform. The SGM-I is administered in Phase 2.

Table 6. The Four-Phase Developmental Process Loop

Phase	Name	Core Activities	Primary Instrument	Success Indicator
Phase 0	Organizational Entry Diagnostic	Distinguish adaptive vs. technical challenge; administer LCI™; establish developmental baseline	LCI™ (all three parts)	Accurate adaptive/technical attribution; developmental zone established
Phase 1	Discover	Map developmental level across seven facets; administer SGM Elements 1–2 (Growth Horizon and Constraint Pattern pre-work); explicit outcome contracting	LCI™ + SGM Elements 1–2	Leader names developmental edge in their own language
Phase 2	Disrupt	Administer SGM Elements 3–4 (Structural Anchor and Load-Bearing Assumption); design Growth Experiments; test assumption validity	SGM-I (Elements 3–4); Growth Experiment log	Load-Bearing Assumption made explicit and stated in falsifiable form; first Growth Experiment attempted
Phase 3	Design	Co-create development arc; calibrate depth, pace, and holding environment to assessed zone	Development plan; holding environment contract	Learner co-designs plan; holding environment confirmed
Phase 4	Demonstrate	Integrate new meaning-making into leadership behavior; measure behavioral delta; plan next loop cycle	360° feedback; LCI™ re-administration (Month 9+)	Observable behavioral change; subject-object shift documented

7. The Seven Facets of Developmental Structure

The seven facets are the observable domains through which underlying developmental structure (subject-object shifts) becomes assessable in leadership behavior. They were derived from CDT constructs cross-referenced with the eight dissertation themes. Each facet is a distinguishable domain of meaning-making with identifiable developmental signatures across RALF levels.

The facets serve two functions: (1) they provide the scoring structure for LCI™ Parts B and C, anchoring AI-assisted and human rater judgments to specific developmental indicators; and (2) they provide the developmental vocabulary for coaching conversations, enabling leaders to locate their edge without stage labeling.



Figure 5. The Seven Facets of Developmental Structure. Each facet is a co-equal observational domain through which the subject-object mechanism becomes visible in leadership behavior. The CDT subject-object mechanism is the theoretical core from which all facets radiate.

Table 7. The Seven Facets of Developmental Structure

Facet	Definition	L3 Signature (Subject to)	L4 Signature (Object)	Assessment Source
Locus of Authority	Where the leader locates the source of valid judgment	External: defers to hierarchy, consensus, or reference group expectations	Internal: grounds decisions in examined reasoning and values	LCI™ Part B, Items 3, 7, 12
Identity Coherence	Stability of self-concept under relational pressure	Destabilized by disapproval; self-concept dependent on others' affirmation	Stable under external pressure when internal reasoning is sound	LCI™ Parts B and C
Perspective Coordination	Capacity to hold and coordinate multiple perspectives simultaneously	Serial; identifies with present view; others' perspectives processed one at a time	Simultaneous; can hold own position while genuinely engaging opposing view	LCI™ Part B, Items 5, 9
Relationship to Own Framework	Degree to which leader's own mental model is visible and revisable	Framework is invisible; leader operates from it without seeing it	Framework is visible and examinable; can revise without identity threat	LCI™ Part C (CIR)
Tolerance for Paradox	Capacity to hold irreducible tensions without collapse or false resolution	Resolves tension by deferring to authority or group consensus	Holds tension from principled position; tolerates ambiguity with equanimity	LCI™ Part B, Items 6, 11; Part C
Meaning-Making about Feedback	How the leader processes and metabolizes developmental feedback	Feedback processed primarily as social signal (approval/disapproval)	Feedback processed as data against internal standards; source evaluated independently	LCI™ Parts A and C
Developmental Investment in Others	Structural commitment to others' growth beyond transactional recognition	Recognition contingent on loyalty and alignment; development offered as reward	Investment in others' development as principled commitment regardless of alignment	LCI™ Part A (DII), Part C

8. Assessment Architecture: The Leadership Complexity Inventory (LCI™)

The Leadership Complexity Inventory (LCI™) is a proprietary developmental assessment designed to identify where a leader currently operates within the RALF developmental architecture — and where the gap exists between their current developmental zone and the complexity demands of their role. Unlike conventional leadership assessments that measure behavioral style or personality type, the LCI™ evaluates how a leader thinks: their capacity to hold multiple perspectives, navigate competing values, exercise authority under pressure, and make meaning of ambiguous organizational challenges. Grounded in adult developmental psychology and constructive developmental theory, the LCI™ produces a placement-with-confidence output — a structured profile of a leader's current developmental zone, the cognitive and relational patterns driving their behavior, and the specific growth edges that separate where they are from where their role requires them to be. The LCI™ (v1.0) is the primary assessment tool for Phase 0 and the Discover phase of the developmental loop. It is proprietary to William C. Rawe Consulting and is currently in active psychometric validation.

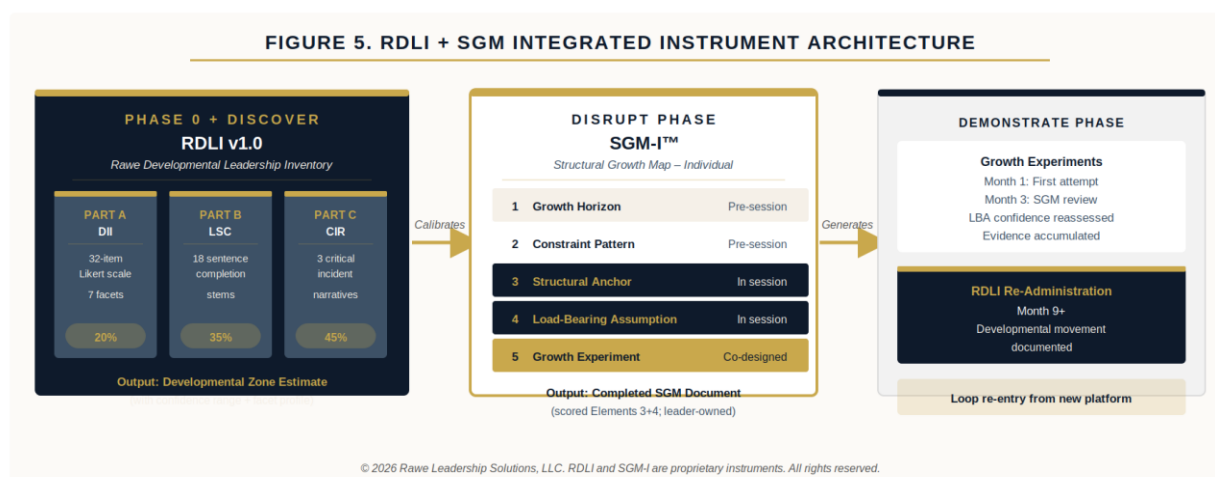


Figure 6. The LCI™ + SGM Integrated Instrument Architecture. The LCI™ assesses developmental zone (Phase 0 and Discover); the SGM-I diagnoses the specific structural constraint generating motivated non-change (Disrupt). Growth Experiment outcomes feed LCI™ re-administration at Month 9.

8.1 Instrument Design Rationale

The LCI™ uses three methodologically distinct part-instruments, each capturing a different aspect of developmental structure. The design rationale is convergent validity through method triangulation: no single method captures developmental structure adequately, and the confidence of a zone estimate increases as all three methods converge on the same zone.

This multi-method approach is not mere comprehensiveness. It is a direct response to the construct measurement challenge posed by CDT: developmental order is not directly observable, cannot be reliably self-reported, and is not fully captured by structured questionnaires alone. The LCI™ architecture deliberately addresses each of these limitations.

8.2 Part A: Developmental Intelligence Inventory (DII)

Part A (DII v1.1) consists of 42 Likert-scale items—six per facet, eleven reverse-keyed—assessing behavioral indicators across the seven facets. It contributes 20% of the weighted composite score. The primary function of Part A is not to directly measure developmental structure—Likert self-report is an inherently limited medium for this purpose—but to provide a behavioral baseline and to identify initial facet patterns for targeted follow-up in Parts B and C.

Psychometric caveat: self-report on developmental behaviors is susceptible to impression management, social desirability bias, and genuine self-perception error (leaders often believe they are more self-authoring than behavioral observation confirms). Part A scores should always be interpreted in the context of Parts B and C, and significant divergence between Part A and Parts B/C is treated as a primary coaching data point—often indicating the gap between aspiration and actual meaning-making structure.

8.3 Part B: Leadership Sentence Completion (LSC)

Part B consists of sentence completion stems calibrated to elicit developmental structure rather than content. It contributes 35% of the weighted composite score. The theoretical basis follows Loevinger's sentence completion methodology, adapted for the CDT construct and the seven RALF facets. Stems are designed to access meaning-making structure by providing minimal external constraints on response formation.

High-level structural scoring criteria emphasize subject-object language rather than content:

- Predominantly subject language ("I have to...", "They expect me to...", "My team wouldn't accept...") → lower zone
- Emerging object language ("I have examined my assumption that...", "I can hold both X and Y as legitimate...") → higher zone
- Mixed or transitional language with oscillation between subject and object frames → transition zone (3/4 or 4/5)

Rater training requirement: LSC scoring requires trained rater calibration. Full human review is required for all LSC responses during the pilot validation phase (2025–2027). AI-assisted pre-scoring provides efficiency but cannot replace calibrated human judgment at the current stage of validation. Inter-rater reliability targets: $r \geq .75$ (acceptable), $r \geq .85$ (strong), consistent with SOI precedent.

8.4 Part C: Critical Incident Reflection (CIR)

Part C requires the leader to narrate a significant leadership challenge, including their decision-making process, the emotional texture of the situation, and their retrospective analysis. It contributes 45% of the weighted composite score—the largest weight—because extended narrative under conditions of genuine complexity provides the richest access to meaning-making structure. The CIR is the closest analog to the Subject-Object Interview (SOI) available in a self-administered format.

Scoring focuses on: how the leader constructs agency and causality in the narrative; what they are able to name as their own assumptions versus what remains invisible; how they handle

complexity, contradiction, and uncertainty in their account; and whether the retrospective analysis exhibits genuine object-level examination of their own reasoning process.

8.5 Composite Scoring and Zone Determination

Table 8. LCI™ Scoring Architecture

Component	Weight	Method	Scoring Mode	Primary Construct Captured
Part A: DII	20%	Likert self-report	Algorithmic with human review	Behavioral indicators across seven facets; self-perception baseline
Part B: LSC	35%	Sentence completion	AI pre-score + mandatory human review	Structural meaning-making via subject-object language analysis
Part C: CIR	45%	Extended narrative	Mandatory full human review	Developmental structure under complexity; closest SOI analog

The composite score produces a developmental zone designation (L3, L3/4, L4, L4/5, L5) with a confidence range. Zone designations are not communicated as labels in client reports. All language in reports emphasizes current meaning-making strengths and the identified developmental edge. The scoring architecture is designed so that divergence between components is as informative as convergence—a leader who scores L4 on Part A but L3 on Parts B and C is not an L4 leader; they are a leader whose behavioral aspirations exceed their current meaning-making structure.

8.6 Interim Safeguards, Integration Guidance, and Validation Status (as of 2026)

The LCI™ is a developmental assessment instrument in active validation. Users and organizational clients should treat zone estimates during the pilot phase (2025–2027) as directionally informative, not definitively diagnostic. All engagements should be calibrated to the confidence range, not the point estimate.

— LCI™ Usage Guidance, Pilot Phase

Current validation status: The LCI™ has completed instrument design (v1.0) and initial content validation through expert review. Psychometric validation—including convergent validity with the Subject-Object Interview, inter-rater reliability for human-scored components, test-retest reliability, and incremental validity relative to existing leadership assessments—is in progress per the 24-month validation roadmap.

Convergent validity target: $r \geq .60$ with SOI (acceptable), $r \geq .70$ (strong), on matched subsample ($n = 20\text{--}30$ per zone). Organizations using the LCI™ during the pilot phase are encouraged to administer a parallel SOI on a subsample of $n = 20\text{--}30$ to accelerate calibration and contribute to the validation dataset.

Integration guidance: The LCI™ is designed to complement, not replace, existing tools. Recommended comprehensive assessment battery:

- LCI™: developmental structure (zone, facet profile, confidence range)
- Validated 360° feedback instrument: behavioral outcomes as observed by others
- Personality or competency inventory: horizontal capability and stable trait profile

Divergence between LCI™ zone and 360° ratings often signals a developmental edge or impression management pattern—prime coaching material. A leader rated highly by others on behavior who scores in the lower developmental zones typically has well-learned behavioral scripts that may not hold under novel adaptive pressure. A leader rated lower on behavior who scores in higher developmental zones may be in a role or culture that does not draw on their capacity.

Human review thresholds: All LSC and CIR responses receive mandatory human review during the first 24 months of operation. AI-assisted pre-scoring for Part B may be used for efficiency after calibration set development (target n = 100+ per zone) but does not replace human review. Confidence thresholds govern escalation to senior human review.

Part A interim safeguards: Two automated validity screens flag response-quality risk prior to scoring: ALL_HIGH (global item mean ≥ 4.5) and STRAIGHT_LINE (response standard deviation < 0.3). In addition, Part A composite scores falling in the nominal L4 range (3.6–4.2) are treated as L3/4 provisional rather than L4-confirmed until empirical recalibration at the n = 40 matched-SOI norming milestone. These safeguards reflect the known inflation bias of self-report on developmental constructs and are governed by the LCI™ Scoring Manual (v1.0).

8.7 The Structural Growth Map (SGM™): The Disrupt Phase Instrument

The Structural Growth Map (SGM™) is RALF's proprietary diagnostic instrument for the Disrupt phase. Where the LCI™ answers the question "What is this leader's current developmental zone?", the SGM answers the question "What specific subject-object dynamic is generating this leader's most persistent pattern of motivated non-change?" The two instruments are functionally sequential and theoretically interdependent: LCI™ data calibrates the SGM session; SGM findings direct the Growth Experiment; Growth Experiment outcomes are one of the primary behavioral data streams against which LCI™ re-administration at Month 9 is interpreted.

The SGM-I (Individual) is the version administered within RETE engagements. It consists of five elements, each addressing a distinct layer of the developmental constraint structure:

Table 8a. SGM-I Five-Element Architecture

Element	Name	What It Surfaces	CDT Function
1	Growth Horizon	The specific behavioral capacity the leader most needs that LCI™ data suggests they cannot yet access reliably	Names the developmental edge in behavioral terms; anchored to LCI™ facet profile
2	Constraint Pattern	Specific, observable behaviors that systematically contradict the Growth Horizon; three behavioral instances minimum	Makes the protective function visible; completed before the session and deepened within it
3	Structural Anchor	What the current meaning-making structure is holding onto; named in subject-object terms and connected to the primary LCI™ facet	Operationalizes the subject-object protection function; scores 1–4 on Subject-Object Precision and Facet Alignment dimensions
4	Load-Bearing Assumption	The specific, falsifiable belief that makes the Structural Anchor feel necessary; stated as “If I [X], then [Y catastrophic consequence] will follow”	The entire constraint rests on this assumption; scores 1–4 on Falsifiability and Structural Load dimensions; Depth Test confirms primary vs. supporting status
5	Growth Experiment	The smallest, most controlled behavioral test of the primary Load-Bearing Assumption that the current holding environment can support; includes pre-stated prediction and observation protocol	Generates falsifying evidence against the LBA; outcomes feed LCI™ re-administration interpretation at Month 9

The critical distinction between the SGM and prior diagnostic tools in this tradition is theoretical grounding: every SGM element is explicitly anchored to the subject-object mechanism rather than to clinical metaphor. The Structural Anchor names what the leader is subject to in CDT terms; the Load-Bearing Assumption names the specific belief that makes the subject-object protection feel necessary; the Growth Experiment generates evidence designed to make that protection unnecessary. The instrument produces a scored, documented deliverable—the completed SGM form—that the leader owns and that is revisited at Month 3 (experiment review) and Month 9 (LCI™ re-administration).

SGM validation runs parallel to the LCI™ validation roadmap (see Section 13). The primary co-validation targets are: convergent validity between SGM Element 3 (Structural Anchor) scores and LCI™ zone estimates (target $r \geq .55$); and predictive validity between SGM Element 4 (Load-Bearing Assumption) depth and developmental movement at Month 9 LCI™ re-administration. Inter-rater reliability for Elements 3 and 4 is established through the 24-case calibration set protocol described in the SGM Facilitator Guide (target $\kappa \geq .70$). The SGM

Facilitator Guide and SGM-I Instrument are separate companion documents to RALF available from William C. Rawe Consulting.

9. Applying the Framework: Three Primary Modes

Table 9. RALF Application Modes

Mode	WCR Program	Primary Application	Unit of Development	Duration
Individual Coaching	RETE	One-on-one executive developmental coaching grounded in full LCI™ assessment and SGM-I diagnostic; structured through the four-phase loop	Individual leader	9–12 months
Cohort/Team Development	DLC / TLT	Group developmental program using LCI™ profiles to calibrate collective holding environment and peer sponsorship	Leadership cohort or team	4–6 months (TLT); 6 months (DLC)
Organizational Consulting	Phase 0 Diagnostic	System-level diagnostic of adaptive vs. technical challenge attribution; LDP architecture consulting	Organization/HR system	4–12 weeks

9.1 Illustrative Case Examples of the Four-Phase Loop in Practice

The following case examples are anonymized composite illustrations drawn from developmental coaching contexts. Like the vignettes in Section 3.2, they are presented to demonstrate the loop's mechanics in applied practice; they do not constitute outcome data, and no result described here should be cited as evidence of program effectiveness pending completion of the validation agenda in Section 10.

Case Example 1: Executive Coaching (RETE) — L3/4 Transition

A CFO ("Sam") struggled with succession planning, defaulting to protecting high performers rather than genuinely developing them. LCI™ administered at intake indicated predominant L3 with emerging L4 capacity across the Locus of Authority and Developmental Investment in

Others facets. The developmental edge: "I cannot risk relational rupture by naming performance gaps to leaders I have protected."

The SGM session (administered in Phase 2: Disrupt) named the Structural Anchor: Sam's current meaning-making structure was anchored to the identity of "the supportive leader" whose relational capital is intact. The Load-Bearing Assumption surfaced as: "If I give direct developmental feedback, I will be experienced as threatening rather than caring, and I will lose the trust I have built." The Growth Experiment (designed in Phase 3: Design) was calibrated from this: one structured developmental conversation per week using a specific feedback protocol, with the predicted outcome logged in writing before each conversation.

Phase 4 (Demonstrate): Sam interrupted the default pattern in real time and received positive feedback from the successor candidate. Re-administration of LCI™ at month 9 showed measurable movement into the L4 zone on the Locus of Authority and Identity Coherence facets. Behavioral outcome: successor candidates advanced within the following year with documented developmental growth. The loop was re-entered at month 9 from a more developed platform.

The structural observation: Sam's constraint was not skill (Sam knew how to give feedback) but meaning-making structure (Sam could not yet author a developmental relationship from a place of principled investment rather than relational protection). The LCI™ identified this; the loop addressed it.

Case Example 2: Team/Cohort Development (DLC)

A cross-functional leadership cohort (n=12) showed collective L3 patterns: consensus-seeking that stalled innovation, avoidance of direct conflict, and decision-making that defaulted to the most senior voice in the room. LCI™ profiles indicated the cohort's center of gravity was in the L3/4 transition zone, with particular developmental edges in Tolerance for Paradox and Perspective Coordination.

The six-month DLC program used the four-phase loop at both individual and team levels. A collective holding environment was designed: peer developmental sponsorship as a structured commitment, productive conflict protocols as a shared experimental practice, and explicit naming of the collective Structural Anchor ("Our current meaning-making structure as a team is anchored to relational preservation—we cannot originate change that our collective structure is designed to resist").

Outcome: Peer developmental sponsorship emerged as a self-sustaining cohort norm; team experiments in productive conflict protocols materially reduced decision latency while maintaining psychological safety as assessed by post-cohort survey. Individual LCI™ re-administration at month 6 showed movement in the Perspective Coordination and Identity Coherence facets in a majority of participants.

The structural observation: Team-level developmental patterns are not simply the sum of individual patterns. Collective immunities must be mapped and addressed at the collective level. The DLC design must account for this.

10. Testable Propositions and Suggested Research Designs

RALF makes five testable propositions. These are offered not as established findings but as the empirical agenda that will determine the framework's validity and the LCI™'s incremental contribution to the field. Responsible evidence-based practice requires that these propositions be stated falsifiably and that the research designs capable of testing them be specified.

Proposition 1

Leaders at higher developmental orders (L4, L5) will demonstrate significantly greater behavioral effectiveness **in roles characterized by high adaptive complexity** (high ambiguity, distributed authority, multi-stakeholder demands) than leaders at lower developmental orders, after controlling for experience, tenure, and technical expertise.

Suggested research design: Multi-organization field study ($n \geq 200$ leaders) with LCI™ + SOI subsample + validated 360° feedback + objective performance metrics in roles rated high vs. low adaptive challenge. Longitudinal arm: 12–18 month follow-up. Controls: tenure, technical expertise, cognitive ability. Analysis: hierarchical regression with moderation by adaptive challenge level.

Proposition 2

Leadership development programs designed with assessment of developmental order as a prior calibrating variable will produce more durable behavioral change than programs of equal duration that omit this step.

Suggested research design: Randomized controlled trial comparing RALF-calibrated programs vs. standard skill-based LDPs of equal duration and intensity. LCI™ pre/post + behavioral transfer measures (360°) at 6 and 12 months post-program. Outcome variable: behavioral transfer durability, not participant satisfaction.

Proposition 3

Organizational developmental climate (the collective meaning-making environment created by senior leadership) moderates the relationship between individual developmental order and leadership effectiveness outcomes.

Suggested research design: Multi-level modeling examining organizational climate moderators on developmental order–outcome relationships. Planned Organizational Developmental Climate Survey (ODCS) as the climate operationalization. Requires nested data structure (leaders within organizations) and minimum $n = 30$ organizations.

Proposition 4

The four-phase developmental loop, when implemented with fidelity to RALF's holding environment principles and Phase 0 diagnostic, will produce measurable upward developmental movement in a meaningful proportion of participants after 9–12 months.

Suggested research design: Longitudinal outcome study of RETE participants ($n \geq 50$) with LCI™ pre- and post-administration (Month 0 and Month 9+), parallel SOI on $n = 20$ subsample for convergent validity, and 360° behavioral rating at intake and month 9. Primary outcome: LCI™ zone movement; secondary outcome: behavioral ratings.

Proposition 5

The LCI™ will demonstrate convergent validity with the Subject-Object Interview ($r \geq .60$) and incremental validity relative to standard leadership competency assessments and personality inventories in predicting adaptive leadership effectiveness.

Suggested research design: Validation study with matched LCI™ + SOI + personality inventory + 360° battery on $n \geq 80$ leaders in adaptive-challenge roles. Correlation matrices, confirmatory factor analysis on facet structure, incremental validity via hierarchical regression. This is the highest-priority psychometric study given the LCI™'s current pre-validation status.

11. Synthesis: Three Convergences from the Empirical Foundation

The empirical literature, the dissertation themes, and the applied CDT tradition converge at three key points that form the load-bearing claims of RALF:

- The distinction between adaptive and technical challenges is the most consequential diagnostic judgment in leadership development—and it is the one most programs skip. Phase 0 exists to make this judgment before development design begins.
- Vertical development (changes in the container) is qualitatively distinct from horizontal capability acquisition (adding content to the container), and the two require fundamentally different intervention designs. Conflating them produces programs that teach the right content in the wrong developmental sequence.
- Assessment before design is not a premium add-on; it is the mechanism through which development can be calibrated rather than assumed. The LCI™ operationalizes this by making developmental order visible prior to program entry.

11.1 Limitations and Boundary Conditions

Responsible evidence-based practice requires explicit acknowledgment of what RALF does and does not currently establish. The following limitations define the responsible scope of current claims and the priorities for ongoing development:

- Sample scope of foundational study: The 2024 dissertation drew from U.S. real estate industry HRD professionals. Broader industry and cultural replication is required before the dissertation themes can be claimed as general.
- Western cultural origins of CDT: Kegan's framework and most validation studies are predominantly Western. Cross-cultural adaptation and validation of the LCI™ and facet language are planned priorities. The subject-object mechanism may have differential salience across cultural contexts in which relational interdependence is a valued adult endpoint rather than a developmental precursor.
- Risk of hierarchy perception: Although RALF explicitly avoids deficit framing, stage-based models can be misread as 'later is always better.' Every level has genuine adaptive capacities; L3 leadership is appropriate and effective in many organizational contexts. Development is not universally desirable or linear, and RALF does not claim it is.

- Regression under stress: Leaders can temporarily regress to earlier meaning-making structures under acute pressure, exhaustion, or trauma activation. RALF assessments measure center of gravity, not ceiling performance. Interventions must distinguish developmental regression from developmental level.
- Measurement and outcome evidence: Full psychometric validation of the LCI™ (convergent validity, inter-rater reliability, test-retest) and longitudinal outcome data on the four-phase loop are in progress. Current claims rest on theoretical coherence, precedent in CDT instruments, and the dissertation themes—not on completed outcome studies.
- Mixed support in existing CDT-leadership research: The broader literature shows mixed support for developmental order predicting leadership effectiveness, limited by small samples and cross-sectional designs. RALF's propositions are designed to address these gaps cumulatively over a multi-year (5–7 year) research agenda.

These limitations do not invalidate the framework. They define the responsible scope of current claims and the empirical agenda that will determine RALF's ultimate contribution to the field.

— RALF Evidence Governance Principle

12. Originality, Lineage, and Positioning

RALF draws explicitly and gratefully on the foundational work of Kegan and Lahey, Heifetz, Argyris and Schön, Loevinger, Cook-Greuter, Uhl-Bien and colleagues, and the broader CDT and adult development tradition. It is an applied synthesis, not a new theory of adult development.

The primary original contributions are: (1) the specific integrated architecture of three dimensions, five adaptive capacities, seven facets, and four-phase loop as a unified operational system; (2) the translation and operationalization tailored to post-pandemic leadership contexts using the 2024 dissertation themes as empirical grounding; (3) the LCI™ as a practical mixed-method assessment instrument with an explicit psychometric validation roadmap; and (4) the Structural Growth Map (SGM™) as a proprietary diagnostic instrument for the Disrupt phase, operationalizing the subject-object protection mechanism through original terminology and a five-element architecture that is theoretically grounded in CDT and methodologically distinct from any prior published instrument. RALF draws upon but is distinct from any single prior methodology.

RALF explicitly does not claim: to have established the CDT propositions it applies (these rest on decades of prior research); to have validated the LCI™'s psychometric properties (this work is in progress); or to have produced outcome evidence for the four-phase loop's effectiveness (this is the agenda of Propositions 2 and 4). What it does claim is theoretical coherence, practitioner utility, and a falsifiable empirical agenda.

13. Future Development

The following development priorities are sequenced by their criticality to the LCI™ validation agenda and the firm's evidential claims:

- Year 1–2: Assemble expert content validation panel for LCI™; recruit cognitive interview participants; develop calibration set of human-scored LSC and CIR responses (target n = 100+ per zone). Begin convergent validity data collection with SOI subsample.
- Year 2–3: Publish inter-rater reliability data for LCI™ Parts B and C; establish AI-assisted scoring thresholds based on calibration set; launch longitudinal outcome study for RETE participants (Proposition 4).
- Year 3–5: Convergent validity study with SOI (Proposition 5); begin cross-cultural adaptation and validation of facet language; develop Organizational Developmental Climate Survey (ODCS) for system-level assessment.
- Year 4–7: Randomized controlled trial comparing RALF-calibrated vs. standard LDPs (Proposition 2); practitioner certification program with fidelity standards for the four-phase loop; open-access release of Phase 0 diagnostic protocol to accelerate independent research partnerships.

The most durable, high-value leadership development businesses are not built on personality or programming. They are built on methodology—a defensible, research-grounded framework that organizes all work, attracts all clients, and justifies all pricing. RALF is that methodology for William C. Rawe Consulting.

— William C. Rawe Consulting Strategic Vision

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