



PARTNERSHIP

A Note from Beyond - On Clare Graves and Spiral Dynamics®

We have worked with individuals, teams and organizations for many years and we are continually exploring ideas to bring to our work. Spiral Dynamics is one of the most significant and useful models we have come across.

When we were introduced to this model we were hit by a series of insights and 'aha' moments. It made sense of situations we see in our work, we saw it had broad practical application to the world at large and we valued that it was solidly based on extensive and academically rigorous research.

Spiral Dynamics is not the whole answer by any means. However, it is a model that helps us understand **how it is that people think and behave the way they do** and how we need to respond in order to either get the best out of them or to help them change. It has helped us to make sense of the behaviour of individuals and of what we see happening in teams, organisations and society at large.

The model explained for example, **why an intervention that works brilliantly in one situation does not create the same results in another**. It calls for managers, educators and policy designers to move beyond the easy option 'one size fits all' approach. What Spiral Dynamics shows is that what works best with an individual, group or organization depends on where they are on the spiral. The spiral being a sequence of value and thinking systems that human systems from individuals to societies seem to pass through.

Spiral Dynamics is based on the work of **Clare Graves**. He derived his model from many years of research which started in the 1950's, asking people the question "**What is a mature human being like?**" From the data Graves identified what he called Levels of Existence. Each level reflecting a particular way of looking at and thinking about the world which then feeds through into behaviour.

We all know that people are different, that they have different motivations and values and thinking patterns. What Clare Graves showed and what Spiral Dynamics maps out, is that **there is a pattern to these differences**, a sequence of identifiable levels, with their distinct belief systems, deep values, thinking patterns and motivations and that people individually or in groups move between levels in response to the life conditions they are experiencing.

So far **eight levels have been identified as present in all human society**. Some have only emerged in recent times so what we have now in the world, in our organizations and indeed within ourselves is a greater range of values and thinking patterns. **Spiral Dynamics maps this increasing complexity**. Much as we would wish it otherwise not everybody sees the world in the same way we do. We can however begin to understand how others see the world, which may in itself be enough, for example to appreciate the contribution someone else, who frankly annoys us, makes to the team, but further **this model can point the way to how to lead and bring about appropriate change**.

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As the name implies this is a dynamic model, **it embraces open systems rather than closed typologies** because change is constant, (new value systems and behaviours emerge in response to changing life conditions). People can move on the spiral over time, so they may need to be managed or interacted with quite differently today than a few years ago and **people may be moving on the spiral further and faster than their managers, parents or teachers! We need to learn how to look forwards and backwards and learn to teach, manage and work with people where they are, not where we are.** This model challenges us to look to a broader picture and skillfully work with these differences.

What is also so attractive to us about this model is that rather than contradicting other approaches to human profiling it can embrace them and enhance the understanding and application of these other approaches. Spiral Dynamics has been likened to scaffolding within which many other theories and approaches can fit. It provides the high level map that points towards best fit of other theories, practices and processes to the situation at hand, providing a structure to answer the questions "**How is it best for who to manage (or teach or lead) whom, to do what, when?**"

Much of our own work involves identifying and highlighting the fundamental patterns being played out by our clients to help them identify what is really going on so as to better define what they want, where they are now and how to get from here to there. Spiral Dynamics typically phrases the question '**Change from what to what?**' since the change that is appropriate depends on where the human system (individual, group, organization, country) is on the spiral.

To borrow from another discipline, "If you know what you are doing you can do what you want". It is a question of awareness and not just awareness of presenting symptoms, behaviours or surface values but deep structure patterns, beliefs and value systems upon which, often unconsciously, we are making choices and decisions. In Spiral Dynamics **it is not what we are thinking about (content) but how we are thinking about that content which gives us a clue to what level we are operating from.** It is sometimes this distinction between content (what) and process (how) that leads to confusion and misinterpretation.

The context we live in today is in greater motion than ever, we need to be nimble, have a variety of choices and be behaviourally flexible. When designing strategy, does it fit a limited set of circumstances or is it adaptable to the positional changes on the spiral, which are possibly inevitable and certainly likely? Has it considered that **certain thinking styles might be better suited to certain problems in a particular space/time** appropriately tailored to the particular organisation.

In Australia, Optimal Learning is **applying Spiral Dynamics with at risk youth.** They have developed a successful 20 week programme for such teenagers, applying Spiral Dynamic thinking and principles and also the teenagers are learning and using the model themselves.

Using this model and the Spiral Dynamics questionnaires with boards and senior management teams we can profile the individual team members, their relation to each other and the team as a whole. These may then be mapped against the profile of other stakeholders and the organization. This information then points the way to how they can best match-pace-lead others and the organisation. Designing and implementing the 'how' then brings in other models and skills.

Spiral Dynamics is an open ended, dynamic and widely applicable framework. In our opinion it is worth knowing both professionally and personally.

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