

LEADERSHIP READINESS AS A MEASURABLE CONSTRUCT: An Agency-Grounded, Three-Layer Architecture for the Leadership Transition

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Abstract

Leadership transitions are consistently treated as a promotion problem, even though the empirical patterns that follow senior appointments often implicate more than the individual leader's current competence (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Berns & Klarner, 2017). Successor outcomes can be shaped by predecessor effects, the succession process itself, and a mismatch between the successor's narrow expertise and the broader contextual demands of the new role, indicating that transition outcomes can fail for reasons that are not reducible to present-role performance alone (Conger & Nadler, 2004). This working paper stipulates leadership readiness as the state of being prepared to perform effectively in a leadership role one does not yet occupy, and argues that readiness should be modeled as a target- and context-sensitive state rather than treated as an intuitive label for competence proxies (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987).

The construct is organized using a social-cognitive agency macro-frame connected to Bandura's social cognitive tradition as it has been explicitly applied to leadership functioning through leadership self-efficacy (McCormick, 2001). The paper specifies a three-layer architecture: a Vertical Capacity Core justified by evidence that developmental architecture predicts multi-source leadership effectiveness ratings; Transition-Specific Readiness mapped to discrete passages (SHIFT, ARENA, ASCENT, EDGE), consistent with evidence that role transitions trigger identity work, anxiety, threat, and non-default lingering identities that persist beyond role change; and Context and Trajectory, grounded in research showing that leadership changes are organizational turning points with identifiable predictors and consequences beyond the focal individual (Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019; Berns & Klarner, 2017).

This architecture is positioned as an extension of developmental readiness work that distinguishes motivational and ability components of readiness-to-develop, specifying a downstream performance criterion, adding a transition-specific middle layer, and adding an explicit contextual and trajectory layer (Avolio & Hannah, 2009; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). The construct is falsifiable: it is wrong if readiness measures fail incremental validity over established baselines, collapse onto developmental-readiness factors, or if the proposed layers do not empirically separate (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

Keywords: *leadership readiness, leadership transitions, human agency, metacognition, leader self-complexity, vertical development, constructive-developmental theory, developmental readiness, identity work, succession*

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Methodological Note

This paper synthesizes peer-reviewed research from leadership development, organizational psychology, adult development, and succession theory to specify leadership readiness as a measurable construct and to define an architecture and validation agenda for it. The evidence base was assembled through systematic searches of peer-reviewed journals, with verification of each citation against primary sources. The construct, its three-layer architecture, and the four validity tests are presented as testable propositions; validation studies of the Leadership Readiness Diagnostic are in development and will be reported separately. Accordingly, this paper is positioned as a conceptual and theory-building working paper rather than an empirical validation study.

1. The Readiness Problem

Organizations regularly place people into leadership roles they have never held, then learn, after the appointment, whether the leader can actually function effectively in the new situation (Gabarro, 1987). This discover-it-after pattern is most visible at senior levels, where early failure and underperformance cannot be explained solely as a deficiency in technical competence but often reflect the interaction between the incoming leader and the inherited leadership context (Conger & Nadler, 2004). In CEO transitions, successor performance can be strongly affected by the predecessor's actions, the succession process itself, and the successor's narrow expertise paired with an inability to set a proper leadership context, indicating that transition outcomes are shaped by a system of forces rather than by the new leader's capabilities alone (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Succession research similarly treats executive leadership change as a critical turning point and emphasizes that decades of scholarship have accumulated insights into the predictors and consequences of these transitions, further underscoring that transition outcomes are a distinct phenomenon with their own antecedents and dynamics (Berns & Klarner, 2017).

This is not a CEO-only problem. Gabarro's study of taking charge and manager succession argues that success or failure in new positions depends on identifiable factors, including prior experiences and support from superiors, and on the steps involved in mastering the situation, reinforcing the view that transition success is a process with analyzable inputs rather than a post hoc narrative about talent (Gabarro, 1987). At the organizational level, longitudinal evidence from turbulent environments indicates that succession can exert a positive influence on performance, can alter the knowledge, skills, and interaction processes of the senior management team, and has stronger positive impact when paired with strategic reorientation, again showing that transitions are not simply individual-level moves but interventions into a system that can change its trajectory depending on timing, conditions, and fit (Virany et al., 1992).

A parallel empirical stream is the executive derailment literature. Derailment studies have been used to identify developmental needs of managers aspiring to senior leadership positions, and have explicitly examined whether derailment factors persist over time and apply across cultures (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). This persistence logic matters for readiness: if predictable derailment patterns are stable across time and cultures, then readiness for senior roles cannot be reduced to local organizational taste or to the leader's current-role output; it requires a developmental account of the leader's capacity to avoid known failure patterns in new, higher-stakes contexts (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995).

The motivating observation for this paper is practical and long-run: across twenty-nine years of service culminating as a Command Chief Master Sergeant in the United States Air Force, the author repeatedly had to distinguish between individuals who appeared promotable on present-role competence and those who were actually prepared to assume leadership accountability in a different role with different demands (Gabarro, 1987; Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). The issue is not whether development or training matters, but whether organizations can identify a readiness state prior to the transition so that misalignment is diagnosed and addressed before it becomes expensive (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987). Gabarro's emphasis on the steps involved in mastering a new situation and the role of superior support carries a nontrivial implication: transition problems are not best treated as fix the person after promotion, but as understand and prepare for the new situation (Gabarro, 1987).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 argues that readiness has remained underdefined because it has been borrowed from adjacent domains and replaced in practice with competence proxies, even as leader-development scholars have warned that ignoring readiness can retard development and subtract from return on investment (Avolio & Hannah, 2009). Section 3 provides a precise definition of leadership readiness and distinguishes it from neighboring constructs, including developmental readiness, which is explicitly framed as readiness-to-develop rather than readiness-to-perform (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Section 4 introduces a social-cognitive macro-frame grounded in Bandura's tradition as it has been brought into leadership research via leadership self-efficacy, and uses this frame to motivate a structured, testable readiness architecture (McCormick, 2001). Sections 5 and 6 specify the three-layer architecture and differentiate it from developmental readiness, and Sections 7 through 10 address measurement, implications, limitations, and conclusions.

2. Why Readiness Has Remained Undefined

Readiness is a high-frequency term in talent decisions, yet it rarely carries a precise, measurable definition (Avolio & Hannah, 2009). The result is predictable: readiness becomes a conversational label that can be attached to competence, reputation, tenure, or managerial preference, rather than a construct that can be challenged by evidence. In practice, the field tends to treat readiness as if it were an intuitive summary of what is already measurable.

2.1 The Term Is Borrowed, Not Built

Where readiness has been defined rigorously, it has typically been defined in adjacent domains, for example readiness for organizational change or readiness in operational and military terms, rather than as an individual-level state tied to leadership role transitions (Berns & Klarner, 2017). The leadership-transition problem is nevertheless well documented as a distinct class of organizational turning points with long-run consequences, which implies that a transition-focused readiness construct is conceptually warranted even if the field has not yet converged on one (Berns & Klarner, 2017). The same logic appears in manager-succession research, where successor outcomes depend on identifiable factors and the steps involved in mastering the new situation, suggesting that readiness is not an ineffable gut feel but an analyzable precondition state for transition success (Gabarro, 1987).

2.2 Competence Is Easier to Measure Than Readiness

Competence frameworks are attractive because they produce checklists, ratings, and apparently objective comparisons. In contrast, readiness is inherently forward-looking: it concerns functioning in a role not yet occupied (Gabarro, 1987). That forward-looking feature raises the evidentiary bar because readiness must be validated against subsequent transition outcomes, not merely correlated with present-role output (Conger & Nadler, 2004).

A parallel argument appears in the leader development literature: scholars have noted that many leader development interventions ignore participants' developmental readiness, and that doing so can retard development and subtract from the potential return on investment (Avolio & Hannah, 2009). This is structurally similar to the competence-substitution problem: when readiness is not assessed, the field defaults to what is easy to observe and then misattributes downstream failure or slow growth to deficits that may have been diagnosable earlier (Avolio & Hannah, 2009).

2.3 Readiness Is a State, Not a Trait

A further reason readiness has resisted definition is that the construct behaves like a state rather than a trait (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987). A trait framing encourages organizations to treat readiness as a stable property rather than as a time-stamped judgment relative to a named target (Gabarro, 1987). But the evidence base around transitions points in the opposite direction: successor performance depends on predecessor effects and on the succession process itself, and can also shift when succession coincides with strategic reorientation, all of which implies that readiness necessarily varies as the target context varies (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Virany et al., 1992). Treating readiness as a state therefore makes it more measurable, not less, because state

implies a time of assessment, a named target role or transition, and observable criteria after the transition against which predictions can be tested (Gabarro, 1987).

3. Defining Leadership Readiness

This paper stipulates leadership readiness as **the state of being prepared to perform effectively in a leadership role one does not yet occupy** (Conger & Nadler, 2004). The definition is designed to be testable because it ties the construct to a specific criterion class, post-transition effectiveness, and therefore creates an obligation to demonstrate prediction beyond common proxies (Berns & Klarner, 2017).

Three elements do the analytic work. First, readiness is a state: it is time-stamped and can change as experiences, supports, and contextual conditions change, consistent with evidence that successor outcomes are shaped not only by the individual but by predecessor and process forces that can vary across transitions (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Second, readiness is forward-looking: it concerns functioning in a future role, which aligns with the manager-succession view that success or failure in new positions depends on identifiable factors and on steps involved in mastering the new situation, which must be navigated after the move rather than merely demonstrated before it (Gabarro, 1987). Third, readiness concerns effective performance in the new context: this element is required because derailment research explicitly focuses on developmental needs of aspirants to senior leadership and on the persistence of failure patterns across time and cultures, which implies that readiness should be evaluated against the failure-prone demands of higher-level roles rather than against present-role output alone (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995).

The table below situates readiness relative to neighboring constructs that are commonly conflated in promotion decisions (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

Table 1. Readiness Against Its Neighbors

Concept	How it differs from readiness
Competence	Competence is typically inferred from demonstrated capability in the current role, but transition outcomes can be shaped by predecessor effects, succession-process dynamics, and context-setting demands that are not captured by current-role proficiency alone (Conger & Nadler, 2004).
Potential	Potential is a broad forecast that someone could succeed at higher levels, whereas readiness is tied to a specific transition and the conditions that accompany it; succession research treats leadership change as a critical turning point with identifiable predictors and consequences, indicating that readiness judgments must be conditional on transition context rather than generalized upward indefinitely (Berns & Klarner, 2017).
Performance	Current-role performance is observable output in the current context, yet derailment studies emphasize persistent developmental needs of aspirants to senior roles and examine whether derailment factors apply across cultures and time, implying that observed output can coexist with vulnerabilities that become decisive after promotion (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995).
Developmental	Developmental readiness emphasizes readiness-to-develop: motivation to develop (e.g.,

Concept	How it differs from readiness
readiness	learning goal orientation, developmental efficacy) and ability to develop (e.g., self-awareness, self-complexity, metacognitive ability). Transition readiness, by contrast, is stipulated here as readiness-to-perform in a specific next role; the two are sequentially related but not identical, because ignoring readiness can retard development and reduce returns, showing that readiness-to-develop is an upstream condition whose downstream consequence must still be tested against later effectiveness criteria (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Avolio & Hannah, 2009).

The developmental-readiness boundary deserves special emphasis because it is a predictable reviewer critique (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Developmental readiness has been explicitly framed in terms of motivation and ability to develop, including learning goal orientation and developmental efficacy (motivation) and self-awareness, self-complexity, and metacognitive ability (ability). That framing is upstream: it specifies what enables leaders to benefit from developmental experiences and interventions rather than what enables them to execute effectively in a specific new role immediately after the transition (Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

The transition-readiness construct proposed here is downstream by design (Conger & Nadler, 2004). It is intended to be evaluated against transition outcomes in which context-setting demands, predecessor effects, and succession-process dynamics can become decisive, such that a leader can be highly capable in learning and still be unprepared for the specific role demands and context conditions they will inherit. Accordingly, the two constructs can be related without being redundant: developmental readiness should predict developmental gain, while transition readiness should predict post-transition effectiveness in the presence of the real successor context (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

4. The Macro-Frame

A defensible construct requires a macro-theory that clarifies what kind of thing the construct is and what mechanisms plausibly produce it. The macro-frame adopted here is social-cognitive and agency-oriented, using Bandura's social cognitive tradition as it has been explicitly translated into leadership research through leadership self-efficacy, which is proposed as a key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in dynamic environments (McCormick, 2001). If leader functioning in dynamic environments is regulated by such cognitive variables, then readiness for leadership transitions should be conceptualizable in terms of preconditions that shape how leaders self-regulate, interpret, and act under novel demands rather than solely in terms of accumulated skills (McCormick, 2001).

The agency lens is particularly relevant because transitions shift not only task demands but also the mode by which influence is exercised (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987). Succession and taking-charge research highlights that successor performance is shaped by predecessor actions and the succession process itself, and that mastering the new situation is a staged process influenced by superior support and prior experience. These claims imply that readiness must include mechanisms

for exerting influence through changing relational and structural conditions, not merely executing personally held tasks (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987).

A constructive-developmental lineage is also implicated by the evidence that developmental level predicts multi-source leadership effectiveness (Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). That lineage traces to Kegan's (1982) stage theory of how adults reorganize their meaning-making over time, which McCauley et al. (2006) brought formally into leadership research as a way to understand how leaders develop the capacity for more complex sensemaking, and which Day et al. (2009) integrated with identity and expertise into a developmental account that treats leader capacity as malleable rather than fixed. Psychosocial development predicts peer, subordinate, and supervisor ratings of cadet leader performance, indicating that developmental architecture is not merely theoretical but empirically associated with leadership outcomes under substantial role demands (Bartone et al., 2007). Similarly, constructive developmental level, an operationalization of Kegan's orders of development, predicts leadership effectiveness as measured by 360-degree feedback across superiors, subordinates, and peers, reinforcing the claim that readiness-relevant developmental capacities can be detected via multi-source criteria rather than inferred solely from self-report or managerial impression (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Kegan, 1982). At the senior-most level, organizational transformation outcomes have been linked to the ego development stage of the CEO and senior advisers, and failures to progress developmentally have been associated with losses of personnel, industry standing, and money (Rooke & Torbert, 1998).

Taken together, these findings motivate operationalizing leadership readiness as a layered construct anchored in measurable developmental and transition mechanisms (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Berns & Klarner, 2017; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019). The next section specifies that architecture explicitly: a transition-agnostic Vertical Capacity Core supported by developmental-effectiveness findings, a transition-specific layer tied to identity work and role-transition dynamics, and a context-and-trajectory layer consistent with succession research that treats leadership changes as turning points with identifiable predictors and consequences.

5. The Three-Layer Architecture of Readiness

Readiness is treated here not as a single score but as the organizing center of a layered system whose components sit at different distances from the target role (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987). This layered view is motivated by the empirical reality that leadership success and failure in transitions is shaped simultaneously by individual developmental architecture and identity processes, the specific demands of the target passage, and succession context and the leader's experience history, forces that the succession and derailment literatures treat as consequential and partly independent of a leader's current-role competence (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019; Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). The table below summarizes the proposed architecture at a high level.

Table 2. The Three-Layer Architecture

Layer	What it measures	Primary anchors used in this paper
1. Vertical Capacity Core	Transition-agnostic developmental and self-structure features that condition whether a person can reorganize how they make meaning and act as demands change.	Developmental architecture predicts multi-source leader effectiveness (Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008); constructive-developmental lineage (Kegan, 1982; McCauley et al., 2006; Day et al., 2009); CEO transformation outcomes (Rooke & Torbert, 1998).
2. Transition-Specific Readiness	The demands of a specific passage (SHIFT, ARENA, ASCENT, EDGE), organized around cognitive ability and motivation or regulation and expressed as transition-specific dimensions.	Role change can trigger identity threat and lingering identities (Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019); leader identity is multidimensional (Shaughnessy & Coats, 2018; Hammond et al., 2025); role-transition fragmentation (Jiang et al., 2025).
3. Context and Trajectory	The readiness-relevant features of the receiving system plus the leader's event history, integration, and recent growth trajectory.	Predecessor effects, succession process, and context-setting failure (Conger & Nadler, 2004); experience as the primary source of learning to lead (McCall, 2004).

5.1 Layer 1: The Vertical Capacity Core

Layer 1 asserts a narrow but consequential claim: before an organization asks whether a person is ready for a specific transition, it should ask whether the person possesses the developmental and self-structural capacity to reorganize themselves when the rules of effectiveness change (Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). This layer is transition-agnostic, because it concerns the person's capacity to change their own sensemaking, identity organization, and self-regulation under discontinuous role demands, capacities that are implicated whenever a role change produces uncertainty, threat, or a need for qualitatively different forms of influence (Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019).

The strongest reason to include a vertical-capacity layer is that developmental architecture has already been shown to predict leadership effectiveness using multi-source criteria, which helps defend this layer against the predictable objection that it is merely conceptual (Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). Bartone and colleagues report that psychosocial development predicts multiple peer, subordinate, and supervisor ratings of cadet leadership performance during later years at the U.S. Military Academy, when cadets hold substantial leadership roles (Bartone et al., 2007). Harris and Kuhnert similarly report that constructive developmental level predicted leadership effectiveness using 360-degree feedback across superiors, subordinates, and peers (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). Together, these findings establish a measurement-relevant point: developmental architecture variables can connect to leadership criteria that are not reducible to a single rater or a single performance channel, which is the kind of evidence needed to justify a Layer 1 that is more than an interpretive metaphor.

At the senior end of the leadership pipeline, Rooke and Torbert frame CEO ego development stage as one critical variable in successful organizational transformation toward becoming a learning organization, and they also observe consequential organizational losses in personnel, standing, and money in cases where organizations did not progress developmentally (Rooke & Torbert, 1998). For a readiness architecture, the key implication is not that stage is destiny, but that leader developmental level is plausibly criterion-relevant at the enterprise boundary where leaders are required to transform systems rather than merely optimize a function.

Within this Layer 1 logic, the present architecture treats leader functioning as regulated by cognitive variables that operate in dynamic environments (McCormick, 2001). McCormick proposes a leadership approach grounded in social cognitive theory that treats leadership self-efficacy as a key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in a dynamic environment. This supports the broader readiness claim that effectiveness in transitions hinges not only on having skills but also on cognitive regulators that shape how leaders interpret novelty, persist under uncertainty, and adapt their approach when their prior identity and prior routines lose traction (McCormick, 2001; Wittman, 2019).

Identity disruption at transition is therefore not a side issue; it is a mechanism that can prevent capability from expressing as effectiveness (Wittman, 2019). Wittman frames role change as an uncertainty-producing event that can trigger appraisals and coping responses, and develops a model that includes lingering identities, identities premised on former roles that persist significantly beyond role change, further arguing that identity adaptation is not the default response to the ongoing uncertainty created by many role changes (Wittman, 2019). At the entry boundary into leadership, Yip and colleagues state directly that transitioning to a first-time leader role requires identity work, and note that new leaders can experience identity anxiety, threat, conflict, and the undoing of valued aspects of identity in becoming a leader (Yip et al., 2019). Recent identity scholarship reinforces why this layer is central: leader identity is best understood as complex and multidimensional rather than a single on-or-off self-label (Shaughnessy & Coats, 2018), and a systematic review of nearly two decades of leader-identity research synthesizes how that identity is constructed and the functions it serves for motivation, interpretation, and relational grounding (Hammond et al., 2025).

The architecture's Layer 1 claim can therefore be stated precisely: a leader without sufficient capacity to reorganize self-understanding and self-regulation under uncertainty is at greater risk of carrying forward patterns from the prior role, in the form of lingering identities, and of experiencing threat that disrupts engagement and adaptation at the moment the new role demands new forms of agency and influence (Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019).

5.2 Layer 2: Transition-Specific Readiness

Leadership development does not unfold as a smooth ramp (Jiang et al., 2025). It is experienced by organizations as a sequence of discontinuous passages in which behaviors that produced success at one level can become liabilities at the next (Gabarro, 1987). This is precisely why readiness cannot be assessed in the abstract: readiness must be evaluated against a named target passage because the identity, influence mode, and self-regulatory demands are qualitatively different across passages,

and because role-transition research has struggled with fragmentation and therefore benefits from process-based, integrative frameworks that unify adjustment and identity-transformation dynamics (Jiang et al., 2025).

The present architecture proposes four transitions, SHIFT, ARENA, ASCENT, and EDGE, and treats them as propositional categories slated for empirical demarcation in the BlackRidge Readiness Lab's Leadership Readiness Diagnostic (LRD) program (Jiang et al., 2025). The purpose of naming them at the construct-definition stage is to force target specificity: a readiness assessment is only meaningful relative to a target transition, and the same person can be ready for one passage and not ready for another at the same moment, because the identity and influence mode demanded by those passages differ (Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019). The dimensions below are offered as testable propositions rather than settled factors; their empirical status is a matter for subsequent validation work rather than definitional assertion (Jiang et al., 2025).

SHIFT: Individual contributor to first-line leader

SHIFT is the passage from doing the work to accomplishing the work through others, which means the leader must begin to exercise influence through proxy rather than through personal execution (Gabarro, 1987). The defining readiness demand is identity work: the person must internalize leader into self-concept and sustain that identity under feedback and ambiguity rather than clinging to prior self-definitions premised on being the expert individual contributor (Yip et al., 2019). Wittman's lingering-identity model supports a specific risk mechanism: when role change is uncertainty-producing, identities premised on former roles can persist beyond the change, and identity adaptation is not the default response (Wittman, 2019). Yip et al. provide the transition-specific consequence: first-time leaders often experience identity anxiety, threat, conflict, and the undoing of valued aspects of identity, reinforcing that SHIFT readiness must include the capacity to manage identity threat, not only knowledge of supervisory techniques (Yip et al., 2019).

Example ability dimensions for SHIFT (propositional): role-reframing ability, the capacity to reinterpret what good looks like from personal output to enabling others' output in a way that stabilizes sensemaking under uncertainty (Wittman, 2019); and uncertainty-appraisal skill, the ability to recognize and respond constructively when role change triggers uncertainty rather than defaulting to coping responses that preserve the old identity (Wittman, 2019). Example motivation and regulation dimensions for SHIFT (propositional): identity-threat regulation, sustaining engagement when identity anxiety and threat occur rather than disengaging or reverting to contributor-only behavior (Yip et al., 2019); and persistence through early-role ambiguity, the capacity to continue enacting a nascent leader identity while feedback and uncertainty are high (Yip et al., 2019).

ARENA: First-line leader to leader of others at scale

ARENA represents a scale shift: the leader must accomplish results through multiple individuals and subteams, facing broader ambiguity and a wider influence span (McCormick, 2001). The readiness demand therefore intensifies proxy agency and increases the requirement for cognitive regulation under dynamic conditions, because the leader's day-to-day effectiveness depends less on direct task competence and more on maintaining functioning and influence when information is

incomplete and social complexity is higher (McCormick, 2001; Wittman, 2019). McCormick's framing of leadership self-efficacy as a key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in dynamic environments supports using self-efficacy-regulation variables as readiness-relevant in ARENA, where dynamic-environment conditions become routine rather than episodic (McCormick, 2001).

Example ability dimension for ARENA (propositional): complexity handling, the ability to maintain coherent decision-making when the situation produces uncertainty and multiple competing demands, rather than simplifying by retreating to familiar tasks (McCormick, 2001; Wittman, 2019). Example motivation and regulation dimension for ARENA (propositional): self-efficacy stability under complexity, sustaining the cognitive regulator that supports functioning when the environment is dynamic and outcomes are delayed (McCormick, 2001).

ASCENT: Leader of others to leader of leaders

ASCENT is the passage from leading people directly to leading through other leaders, which implies a shift toward collective agency executed through subordinate leaders (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). The readiness demand is that the leader's effectiveness becomes increasingly contingent on their developmental architecture and on their ability to create conditions in which other leaders can function, rather than on their personal expertise in a domain (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). The empirical case for developmental architecture is relevant at this level because multi-source effectiveness criteria have been linked to developmental level (Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). The succession literature also suggests a specific failure mode that ASCENT readiness must confront: leaders can fail when they have narrow expertise and cannot set a proper context as a leader (Conger & Nadler, 2004).

EDGE: Leader of leaders to enterprise leadership

EDGE is the passage into enterprise leadership where the leader's primary role is to orchestrate collective agency at scale and to steward system-level adaptation across strategic time horizons (Berns & Klarner, 2017). At this passage, readiness must explicitly incorporate succession context because successor effectiveness is shaped by inherited conditions, predecessor actions, and the succession process itself, forces that cannot be reduced to the incoming leader's current-role competence (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Conger and Nadler identify three forces behind new-CEO failure that sit outside a narrow competence-predicts-readiness logic: the impact of the predecessor CEO's actions on successor performance, the succession process itself, and the incoming leader's narrow expertise coupled with an inability to set a proper context as a leader (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Succession can also alter the knowledge, skills, and interaction processes of the senior management team, with positive impacts accentuated when succession coincides with strategic reorientation, indicating that context and timing can moderate whether leadership change becomes value-creating or value-destroying (Virany et al., 1992).

Layer 2 therefore operationalizes a central readiness principle: readiness cannot be assessed in the abstract. The same leader can display high readiness for one passage and low readiness for another, because role change is uncertainty-producing, identity adaptation is not automatic, and identity

disruption can persist via lingering identities rather than yielding to adaptation by default (Wittman, 2019).

5.3 Layer 3: Context and Trajectory

Layer 3 locates readiness in environment and time (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987). This is not a rhetorical flourish; it is a direct response to the succession evidence that successor performance is shaped by predecessor actions and the succession process, and to the broader executive-transition literature that treats leadership change as a critical turning point with studied predictors and consequences (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Berns & Klarner, 2017).

First, successor performance is partly a function of predecessor effects. Conger and Nadler identify the predecessor CEO's actions as a force affecting the successor's performance, which implies that a readiness judgment that ignores inherited conditions will systematically misattribute outcomes to the incoming leader's individual capability (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Second, they identify the succession process itself as a force, again implying that readiness includes the receiving system's preparation and governance mechanisms, not only the leader's traits or competencies. Third, their identification of narrow expertise and inability to set proper context as a failure mode implies that readiness must include variables that predict context-setting behavior rather than merely technical competence in the predecessor role (Conger & Nadler, 2004).

At earlier leadership levels, analogous dynamics appear in the manager-succession literature. Gabarro reports that through studies of actual cases of manager succession he isolated factors that cause managers to succeed or fail in new positions, including prior experiences, support from superiors, and the steps involved in mastering the new situation (Gabarro, 1987). This supports treating readiness as time-sensitive and transition-specific: readiness is shaped by experience history and by the receiving system's support, not solely by current-role competence.

Layer 3 also requires an explicit trajectory component because leader development is driven primarily by experience rather than by formal programs (McCall, 2004). McCall contends that the primary source of learning to lead is experience, explains that training and formal programs play a relatively modest role compared to experiential learning, and argues that experience, mostly through assignments, should form the core of executive development. A readiness model that is only cross-sectional therefore misses an essential dynamic: leaders can be on different developmental slopes even when they have the same current level, and the organization needs a way to distinguish closing the gap from standing still (McCall, 2004).

Taken together, the three layers permit a single readiness judgment to be decomposed into where a leader is short, whether the limiting factor is developmental architecture and self-structure (Layer 1), mismatch to the target passage's specific identity and influence demands (Layer 2), or contextual and trajectory constraints that will shape early-tenure effectiveness regardless of individual capability (Layer 3) (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Gabarro, 1987; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008).

6. Differentiation from Developmental Readiness

A careful reviewer is correct to see overlap between the present architecture and the developmental readiness construct advanced by Avolio and Hannah and extended by Hannah and Avolio (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). That overlap is real at the level of emphasis on motivational and cognitive capacities that condition development, and it should be treated as intellectual lineage rather than as a threat. Avolio and Hannah observed that a validated framework and theory for leader development did not yet fully exist, and that the field lacked a method for determining who is developmentally ready to engage in leader development, and they called for work that would specify both the construct and its measurement (Avolio & Hannah, 2009; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). The present paper answers that call for the specific domain of leadership transitions, extending their upstream construct downstream into a transition-specific, context-sensitive, and trajectory-aware architecture. Hannah and Avolio frame developmental readiness in terms of leaders' motivation to develop (interest and goals, learning goal orientation, developmental efficacy) and ability to develop (self-awareness, self-complexity, metacognitive ability), and the present architecture takes those validated components as a foundation to build on (Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

The three-layer readiness architecture takes that upstream insight as given and asks a different, downstream question: after developmental processes have or have not occurred, what is the present-tense state indicating that the leader can perform effectively in the next role, given that performance in transitions is shaped by context, predecessor effects, and identity-disruption dynamics that do not reduce to readiness to learn (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Wittman, 2019)? The differentiation is developed along three explicit dimensions: criterion, structure, and scope.

6.1 Different Criterion

The first differentiation is criterion-based (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Developmental readiness concerns who is ready to benefit from development; the framing explicitly partitions readiness into motivation to develop and ability to develop. The transition-readiness construct proposed here concerns readiness to perform in a role not yet occupied, and that criterion is not interchangeable with readiness to learn because successor performance is influenced by predecessor actions, the succession process, and context-setting failures by leaders with narrow expertise (Conger & Nadler, 2004).

6.2 Different Structure

The second differentiation is structural (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Developmental readiness, by design, is transition-agnostic: it describes capacities that make leaders more or less able and motivated to develop across experiences and interventions. The present architecture argues that a readiness construct meant to support promotion and succession decisions must also contain a middle layer that is explicitly transition-specific, because role change is uncertainty-producing and because identity adaptation is not the default response to role-change uncertainty (Wittman, 2019). Yip et al. state that becoming a first-time leader requires identity work and can involve identity anxiety, threat, conflict, and the undoing of valued aspects of identity; these dynamics are not generic to development but are linked to the specific boundary of entering leadership (Yip et al.,

2019). Wittman's model of lingering identities adds a further structural rationale: when role change triggers uncertainty, former-role identities can persist beyond role change rather than giving way automatically to identity adaptation, which implies that readiness assessment needs a way to detect boundary-specific identity risks and coping patterns rather than assuming that identity reorganization will occur as a byproduct of appointment (Wittman, 2019).

6.3 Different Scope

The third differentiation is scope (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Developmental readiness is primarily an individual-level construct about who can benefit from development experiences and interventions, and the warning about the cost of ignoring developmental readiness is framed in terms of individual development being retarded and returns reduced (Avolio & Hannah, 2009). The present architecture adds an explicit context layer because successor outcomes are shaped by predecessor effects and the succession process itself, and those forces operate at the system and governance level rather than at the level of individual learning capacity (Conger & Nadler, 2004). The architecture also adds a trajectory dimension because experience is the primary source of learning to lead and because assignments should form the core of executive development; McCall's claim that experience is primary and that programs play a modest role implies that readiness should be repeatedly assessed over time rather than treated as a static classification (McCall, 2004).

6.4 Falsifiable Predictions

If the differentiation argued above is correct, it yields three falsifiable empirical predictions (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). First, transition-readiness scores should demonstrate incremental validity for post-transition outcomes beyond developmental readiness, because the transition-readiness construct explicitly incorporates successor-context forces that are not reducible to motivation and ability to develop, such as predecessor effects and the succession process (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Second, transition-readiness indicators should demonstrate discriminant validity relative to developmental readiness, because developmental readiness is framed as motivation and ability to develop whereas transition readiness is scoped to named passages with boundary-specific identity dynamics and contextual constraints; the two should therefore not collapse into a single factor if measured with sufficient specificity and multi-source criteria (Wittman, 2019; Yip et al., 2019; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Third, the three proposed layers should empirically separate rather than collapse into one general factor, because developmental architecture predicts multi-source effectiveness (Layer 1), role change produces identity-specific adaptation versus lingering patterns (Layer 2), and successor outcomes are shaped by predecessor and process forces (Layer 3) (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Wittman, 2019).

If these tests fail systematically across validation samples, if readiness adds no predictive value beyond developmental readiness, or if the proposed layers do not separate empirically, then the architecture as specified is wrong and should be revised rather than defended rhetorically (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008; Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

7. Measurement and Validation

The construct specified in the prior sections is sufficiently specified to support empirical testing because adjacent literatures already demonstrate that leadership-related developmental architecture predicts multi-source effectiveness criteria and that transition outcomes are shaped by successor-context dynamics rather than by individual capability alone (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). The measurement goal in this section is therefore not to invent a new intuition about who will succeed, but to translate an already-observable pattern, developmental and identity architecture and transition context jointly shaping outcomes, into an assessment and validation program that can be falsified by data (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Wittman, 2019; Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

7.1 State, Not Trait

Leadership readiness is treated here as a state that is assessable at a point in time in relation to a specific upcoming role change, because role change itself is an uncertainty-producing event that can yield different self-related outcomes rather than a uniform adaptation by default (Wittman, 2019). Operationally, this implies that a readiness assessment must be time-stamped, explicitly tied to an identifiable transition context, and re-administerable so that change can be detected, because identities and developmental capacities can persist, shift, or destabilize across the same nominal role change depending on how the transition unfolds (Wittman, 2019). The experience-based view of leader development supports state-based operationalization, because the primary source of learning to lead is argued to be experience, with formal training being comparatively modest, implying that readiness-relevant capacity is plausibly sensitive to what has recently happened to the leader rather than fixed as a stable attribute (McCall, 2004).

7.2 Multi-Source Assessment

A multi-source assessment architecture is indicated because developmental level and psychosocial development have been shown to predict multi-rater leadership performance criteria, including peer, subordinate, and supervisor ratings, which provides precedent that readiness-adjacent developmental architecture is visible in ratings from multiple perspectives rather than only in self-report (Bartone et al., 2007). Similarly, constructive developmental level has been reported to predict leadership effectiveness using 360-degree feedback across superiors, subordinates, and peers, supporting triangulation as a measurement design rather than a methodological luxury (Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). Multi-source measurement is also warranted because transition outcomes can be shaped by non-personal forces such as predecessor actions and the succession process itself, which implies that any measurement architecture that relies exclusively on the incoming leader's self-report risks misattributing context-driven variance to individual readiness (Conger & Nadler, 2004).

7.3 Validity Tests

Four validity tests are proposed as explicit empirical claims, each tied to the kinds of criterion problems documented in transition and succession research rather than to circular readiness-predicts-readiness validation (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Berns & Klärner, 2017). First, incremental validity should be tested by evaluating whether readiness scores explain variance in post-transition

effectiveness beyond prior-role performance proxies and beyond a developmental-readiness baseline that explicitly distinguishes motivation-to-develop and ability-to-develop components (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Avolio & Hannah, 2009). Second, discriminant validity should be tested by demonstrating that readiness indicators do not collapse onto developmental-readiness dimensions in measurement models (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Third, predictive validity should be tested against early-tenure and post-transition outcomes that are criterion-relevant in succession and role-change research, because leadership changes are described as critical turning points and because successor success or failure is shaped by predecessor effects, succession processes, and the incoming leader's capacity to set an appropriate context beyond narrow expertise (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Berns & Klarner, 2017). Fourth, layer separation should be tested by examining whether constructs tied to person development and constructs tied to succession context contribute unique variance, because succession research explicitly identifies context forces, predecessor actions and the succession process itself, that operate independently of individual capability (Conger & Nadler, 2004).

7.4 Falsifiability

Falsifiability is treated here as a load-bearing commitment rather than a rhetorical flourish, because interventions that ignore readiness can retard development and reduce return on investment, making it ethically and economically important that a readiness construct be revisable when evidence contradicts it (Avolio & Hannah, 2009). The construct as specified would be revised or abandoned if independent validation samples show any of the following persistent patterns: no incremental validity beyond a developmental-readiness baseline; factor-analytic collapse into developmental-readiness or generic effectiveness factors rather than distinct readiness factors; failure of person-architecture indicators to remain empirically distinguishable from succession-context indicators; or inability to differentiate transition profiles where role change reliably induces identity-work demands and uncertainty-related outcomes (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Wittman, 2019; Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Avolio & Hannah, 2009).

7.5 Developmental Velocity

Repeated measurement is necessary because leader development is argued to be experience-driven, implying that leaders' readiness-relevant capabilities and identities may change as assignments and role experiences accumulate, and because role change itself can produce ongoing uncertainty that does not necessarily resolve into adaptation by default (Wittman, 2019; McCall, 2004). A readiness construct intended for promotion and succession decisions should therefore be sensitive to growth, not only to level: two candidates can present similar readiness at one point while one improves materially over successive re-measurements, which is evidence that experience is being converted into effectiveness-relevant development (Bartone et al., 2007; McCall, 2004).

8. Implications for Practice

A readiness-based approach inverts the dominant promotion logic by shifting emphasis from discovering successor problems after placement to diagnosing transition risk and identity-reorganization demands before placement, because successor outcomes can be shaped by

predecessor actions, by the succession process itself, and by the incoming leader's ability to set a proper context beyond narrow expertise (Conger & Nadler, 2004). This follows from evidence that leadership changes are critical turning points with documented predictors and downstream consequences, and that success or failure in new positions depends on identifiable factors such as prior experience and support from superiors as well as the steps taken to master the new situation (Berns & Klarner, 2017; Gabarro, 1987).

In practice the architecture yields three prescriptions. First, diagnose against a named target transition, because different transitions impose different psychological demands, particularly around identity reorganization; for first-time leadership, identity work is a requirement of the transition rather than an optional refinement (Yip et al., 2019), and at higher levels successor performance is shaped by predecessor actions and succession processes (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Second, build where the layer is short: where gaps are rooted in developmental architecture, structured assignments and experience should form the core of the development strategy, with formal training playing a modest supporting role (McCall, 2004). Third, measure again, because any readiness intervention that changes experience exposure should be followed by re-assessment to determine whether readiness and developmental velocity are sufficient for the timing of the decision (McCall, 2004). The Leadership Readiness Diagnostic developed by the BlackRidge Readiness Lab is the instrument intended to operationalize and test this layered architecture against the multi-source and transition-relevant outcomes discussed above (Bartone et al., 2007; Conger & Nadler, 2004; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008).

The framework's value compounds when the diagnostic is administered across a cohort rather than to a single individual. Cohort administration surfaces patterns that individual assessment cannot: which readiness dimensions are organization-wide strengths and which are shared development gaps, whether readiness improves across repeated administrations as targeted development is applied, and how the contextual conditions of the receiving system vary across the pipeline. Read against the three-layer architecture, these aggregate patterns correspond to the cohort's vertical capacity and transition-specific readiness, to the trajectory of readiness over time, and to the contextual conditions that Layer 3 identifies as consequential (Conger & Nadler, 2004; McCall, 2004; Wittman, 2019).

As an organization administers the diagnostic across its leadership pipeline, it accumulates institutional readiness intelligence: an evidence base describing where its leaders are strong, where transitions tend to break down, and whether development investments are closing the gaps they target rather than being assumed to do so. Because this evidence is specific to the organization and its transitions, it cannot be reconstructed from generic benchmarking, which positions readiness assessment as a continuous organizational-learning system rather than a one-time classification.

9. Limitations and Boundary Conditions

The architecture advanced in this paper is intended to be testable and therefore must be explicit about boundary conditions, especially where the available evidence supports the need for context and identity mechanisms but does not, by itself, uniquely determine the paper's specific taxonomy or operational details (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995; Jiang et al., 2025).

First, any discrete-transition taxonomy should be treated as provisional pending empirical demarcation, because the role-transition literature calls for more comprehensive, process-based frameworks rather than implying that any single partition is settled (Jiang et al., 2025). Second, context readiness is necessarily under-specified unless it is anchored in documented transition forces, and CEO succession research explicitly identifies predecessor effects and the succession process itself as drivers of successor performance (Conger & Nadler, 2004). Third, cross-cultural and cross-sector generalizability should be treated as an open question that requires explicit sampling and testing, because derailment research has been framed as testing whether derailment factors have stood the test of time and are applicable across cultures (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). Finally, the developmental-level evidence on which Layer 1 partly rests, while supportive, has shown mixed effect sizes and known moderators across the broader literature, which is itself a reason to treat the predictive claims as hypotheses for validation rather than settled findings (Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008).

10. Conclusion

Leadership readiness, as defined in this paper, is meaningful only if it can be measured in ways that predict multi-source effectiveness outcomes and remain sensitive to the contextual forces that shape successor performance during transitions (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). The measurement and validation plan presented here follows from existing evidence that psychosocial and constructive-developmental variables predict leadership effectiveness across raters, and that leadership transitions and succession outcomes are shaped by predecessor actions, the succession process, and the need to set context beyond narrow expertise (Conger & Nadler, 2004; Bartone et al., 2007; Harris & Kuhnert, 2008). The contribution is a construct that can be measured before a transition, tested against post-transition outcomes, and decomposed into individual and contextual contributors, so that unreadiness can be diagnosed while it is still inexpensive to correct.

Author Note

Danyell Stoutamire is the founder of the BlackRidge Institute and a retired Command Chief Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force with twenty-nine years of service and an M.S. in Strategic Leadership. The three-layer architecture described here is the conceptual basis of the Leadership Readiness Diagnostic, an instrument in active validation, and its credibility depends on passing the incremental, discriminant, predictive, and layer-separation tests implied by the developmental readiness and succession literatures cited here (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Avolio & Hannah, 2009). Follow-on empirical papers from the BlackRidge Readiness Lab will report separately on each of these four validity tests.

A note on one source: the citation to Bartone et al. (2007) refers to the article in *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(5), 490 to 504. Some secondary indexes list a digest record under a different journal title; readers should consult the primary *Leadership Quarterly* article. The empirical claims attributed to that study, that psychosocial development predicts peer, subordinate, and supervisor ratings of cadet leader performance, are drawn from the primary article.

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