

The Borodich Founder Spiral Diagnostic

A framework for assessing founder cognitive complexity through Spiral Dynamics as one converging lens among several — and the most counterintuitive contribution to venture analysis in the UNLMTD.Growth Methodology.

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the Borodich Founder Spiral Diagnostic — a structured methodology for assessing founder cognitive complexity in early-stage investment decisions. The diagnostic uses Spiral Dynamics as its primary interpretive lens while explicitly acknowledging that the underlying cognitive phenomenon it measures is described, through different instruments and vocabulary, by several converging frameworks in adult developmental psychology: Robert Kegan's evolving self theory, Peter Suedfeld's integrative complexity research, mental complexity assessment in cognitive psychology, and related lines of inquiry. The choice of Spiral Dynamics as primary lens is operational rather than doctrinal.

The central empirical claim is that founders whose companies reach hypergrowth outcomes tend strongly to operate from what Spiral Dynamics labels Yellow consciousness — the level characterized by systems thinking, comfort with complexity, and integration across earlier developmental levels — while retaining the ability to flex downward into Orange achievement and Blue rule-based discipline when conditions require. Founders whose operating mode is confined to a single level, however brilliant within that level, tend to hit predictable organizational ceilings. The diagnostic operationalizes this observation as a forty-five-minute structured interview protocol producing primary level assessment, flex-capacity assessment, and stage-appropriateness scoring.

The paper acknowledges directly that Spiral Dynamics is a contested framework in academic psychology, with legitimate criticism around standardization, falsifiability, and cultural bias. The diagnostic does not require Spiral Dynamics to be a complete or universally valid theory of human consciousness. It requires only that the framework provides a useful interpretive vocabulary for the phenomenon it operationally measures, that the phenomenon itself is real (which the converging frameworks support), and that the diagnostic's scoring correlates with venture outcomes in the empirically observable way the framework claims. The paper takes each of these claims as testable hypotheses rather than established findings.

The paper specifies the diagnostic in operational detail: theoretical grounding across multiple developmental frameworks, the cognitive phenomenon being measured, the forty-five-minute interview protocol with scoring rubrics, three worked case studies illustrating the diagnostic in operation, explicit predictive ambiguity and calibration agenda, and a substantial limitations chapter engaging honestly with the framework's vulnerabilities to legitimate criticism. The paper is positioned as a probabilistic interpretive system under uncertainty, not as definitive cognitive science.

A critical statement of ethical position. The diagnostic measures cognitive complexity relevant to specific aspects of company-building under specific conditions. It does not measure human

worth, moral value, intelligence in any general sense, or developmental status that should affect how a person is treated outside the narrow context of this assessment. Cognitive complexity develops, varies by context, and operates in domains where venture-relevant complexity is one narrow band among many human capacities. The framework is structured to inform investment evaluation and founder self-assessment; using diagnostic assessment to exclude founders from capital, opportunity, or respect represents misuse against which the paper repeatedly and explicitly warns.

The Founder Spiral Diagnostic is the most contrarian published artifact of the UNLMTD.Growth Methodology. It applies a framework largely absent from mainstream venture analysis to a phenomenon — founder cognitive complexity — that mainstream venture analysis has historically treated as either ineffable or irrelevant. Whether the diagnostic survives rigorous empirical validation over subsequent years is itself a falsifiable claim the framework invites rather than resolves.

1 · THE PROBLEM

The Cognitive Dimension Venture Has Not Measured

Every venture investor recognizes that founder quality matters. Almost none have a structured methodology for assessing the specific cognitive property that distinguishes founders whose companies scale from founders whose companies stall.

Ask a venture capitalist what they look for in founders and the answers cluster around a familiar vocabulary: grit, vision, resilience, ambition, learning velocity, communication skill, technical depth, leadership presence. These descriptors are not wrong. They are correlates of founder quality that experienced investors recognize, often without being able to specify what underlying property produces them. The descriptors are downstream observables; what produces them is the upstream cognitive architecture of the founder.

This paper proposes that one specific upstream cognitive property — the founder's level of cognitive complexity, with the capacity to flex across multiple operating modes — is substantially more predictive of hypergrowth outcomes than any of the standard descriptors. The property is not new in psychology; it has been studied for decades under various names in adult developmental research. It is largely new in venture analysis, where it has been treated as either ineffable or irrelevant, and where its absence from the standard founder evaluation toolkit may explain a substantial fraction of the prediction errors that produce venture's characteristic high failure rate among funded companies.

Why Standard Founder Evaluation Underperforms

The standard founder evaluation methodology in venture relies on three primary signals: track record, reference checks, and pattern matching against successful founders the investor has previously encountered. Each of these signals captures something real, but each suffers from limitations that the cognitive complexity framework addresses.

Track record

Past performance is the most reliable predictor of future performance the venture industry has identified, but it has limited applicability at the early stage where most foundational investment decisions are made. First-time founders by definition have no relevant track record. Repeat founders' track records are confounded by the specific conditions of their prior companies — the team they had, the market timing they encountered, the capital environment they operated in — and frequently fail to predict performance in a meaningfully different context. Track record is necessary but insufficient.

Reference checks

Reference signal is unreliable because references are typically selected by the founder, biased toward favorable accounts, and rarely involve direct observation of the cognitive properties the investor is trying to assess. References produce social proof; they rarely produce diagnostic insight into how the founder actually thinks. They also systematically underweight the founder's flex capacity — references tend to describe founders in the mode they most often operated in around the reference, missing the mode-switching capability that distinguishes hypergrowth founders from competent but bounded operators.

Pattern matching

Pattern matching against successful founders works when the investor has encountered enough successful founders to recognize the patterns, but it has well-documented failure modes. It systematically rewards demographic and biographical similarity to successful founders the investor has previously backed, regardless of whether those similarities are causally related to outcomes. It encodes the investor's cognitive biases as methodology. And it fails entirely when the investor is evaluating a founder whose archetype is novel — exactly the situation in which the largest hypergrowth opportunities frequently emerge.

The cognitive complexity framework is not a replacement for track record, reference, or pattern matching. It is the missing fourth signal — the structured methodology for assessing the underlying cognitive property that the other three signals are imperfectly trying to detect.

The Phenomenon the Diagnostic Measures

Across roughly fifteen years of investing and three years of structured application of the diagnostic, a consistent observation has emerged: founders whose companies reach hypergrowth outcomes operate with a cognitive complexity that allows them to do three things simultaneously that founders bounded to single cognitive modes cannot do.

First, they perceive systems rather than events. Where a less complex founder encounters a customer complaint and addresses the complaint, a more complex founder encounters the same complaint and immediately considers what process generated it, what other complaints are likely to follow, what root cause underlies the surface symptom, and what structural change would prevent recurrence. The complaint is data; the system that produced it is the actual problem.

Second, they navigate complexity that paralyzes others. Where a less complex founder faces a situation with multiple competing considerations and freezes, or simplifies the situation by ignoring some considerations, a more complex founder holds the considerations in tension, identifies the underlying values trade-offs, and produces a decision that consciously accepts the

costs being paid. Decision-making under genuine complexity is itself a cognitive capacity that develops, not a matter of intelligence or effort.

Third, and most importantly, they flex across operating modes as conditions require. The same founder who operates from systems-integration consciousness in strategic planning sessions can operate from hard-edged orange achievement when the company needs to execute against a quarterly target, and from blue rule-based discipline when scaling requires consistent organizational process. The flex capacity matters more than the peak capacity. Founders stuck at any single level, however high, hit predictable ceilings; founders with flex across multiple levels keep moving.

The single highest-leverage founder property in venture is not the founder's peak cognitive level. It is the range of cognitive levels across which the founder can flex on demand.

2 · THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The Frameworks Underneath the Diagnostic

Spiral Dynamics is the interpretive vocabulary the diagnostic uses. It is not the only available vocabulary, and the framework's predictive claims do not depend on Spiral Dynamics being a complete theory of consciousness.

The Borodich Founder Spiral Diagnostic operationalizes its assessment through the vocabulary of Spiral Dynamics, a developmental framework originally articulated by Clare Graves in the 1970s and elaborated by Don Beck through the 1990s and 2000s. Within Spiral Dynamics, human cognitive development is described as movement through a sequence of value systems, labeled by colors, each representing a distinct level of cognitive complexity and a distinct way of organizing experience. The relevant levels for venture analysis are typically those in the middle and upper ranges of the model: Red (impulsive, power-oriented), Blue (rule-based, structure-oriented), Orange (achievement-oriented, strategically rational), Green (egalitarian, relationally-oriented), Yellow (systems-integrating), and Turquoise (holistic, planetary).

The choice of Spiral Dynamics as the diagnostic's primary lens reflects practical considerations: it offers an accessible vocabulary, it has been applied across cohorts at the 369x Club accelerator over multiple years producing useful operational signal, and it lends itself to structured interview protocols in ways some alternative frameworks do not. The choice is not a claim that Spiral Dynamics is the most rigorous or comprehensive developmental framework available. It is a claim that Spiral Dynamics is operationally tractable for the specific assessment task the diagnostic performs.

Converging Frameworks in Adult Development

Several lines of developmental research describe substantially overlapping cognitive territory through different conceptual apparatus. The diagnostic should be understood as triangulating a phenomenon that multiple traditions independently observe, rather than as depending on the specific validity of any one framework.

Robert Kegan's adult development theory

Kegan's work, developed at Harvard from the 1970s forward, identifies stages of meaning-making through which adults can develop across lifespan. The stages — socialized mind, self-authoring mind, self-transforming mind — correspond roughly to the Blue-Orange-Green-Yellow progression in Spiral Dynamics vocabulary, with different theoretical anchoring (Kegan emphasizes subject-object relations, Spiral emphasizes value systems). Empirical research using Kegan's instruments has produced more academic acceptance than Spiral Dynamics has, though application to founder assessment specifically has been limited.

Integrative complexity research

Peter Suedfeld and colleagues developed integrative complexity scoring in the 1970s as a method for analyzing the cognitive complexity of decision-making texts. The methodology has been applied extensively to political leaders, business executives, and historical figures, producing decades of empirical findings on the relationship between integrative complexity and decision quality under uncertainty. Integrative complexity scoring is more empirically validated than Spiral Dynamics scoring, but operates on written or transcribed text rather than on live interview, limiting its operational use in venture diligence.

Mental complexity assessment in cognitive psychology

Various instruments in cognitive psychology assess properties closely related to what the diagnostic measures: cognitive flexibility, decision complexity under ambiguity, perspective-taking capacity, abstract reasoning capability, executive function in multi-constraint environments. None of these instruments was developed for founder assessment specifically, but the underlying constructs they measure correlate substantially with what Spiral Dynamics labels as Yellow capacity and Kegan labels as self-authoring or self-transforming mind.

Why convergence matters

The diagnostic's predictive claims do not depend on Spiral Dynamics being correct as a complete theory of consciousness. They depend on the cognitive property the framework labels as Yellow capacity being a real property that exists in founders to varying degrees, being measurable through structured interview, and correlating with venture outcomes. If Spiral Dynamics were proven inadequate as a developmental theory tomorrow, the diagnostic would need to be rewritten in vocabulary drawn from one of the converging frameworks, but the underlying phenomenon it measures would remain. The convergence across independent frameworks is what gives the underlying phenomenon empirical weight; no single framework carries the foundation alone.

The diagnostic measures something real. The framework it uses to describe that something is interpretive and pluralistic. The distinction is methodologically important.

On Spiral Dynamics as a Contested Framework

Spiral Dynamics occupies a complicated position in academic psychology. It has produced substantial practitioner community engagement and operational application in organizational development for several decades, but it has not accumulated the body of peer-reviewed empirical validation that more mainstream developmental frameworks have. Critics have raised legitimate concerns: limited standardization of assessment instruments, vulnerability to cultural bias in the description of higher levels, lack of falsifiable predictions in much of the practitioner

literature, and tendency among some practitioners to treat the framework as established science rather than as interpretive heuristic.

The diagnostic acknowledges these criticisms directly rather than dismissing them. It does not require Spiral Dynamics to be a validated psychological science. It requires Spiral Dynamics to be a useful interpretive vocabulary for a phenomenon that exists, that other frameworks also describe, and that correlates with outcomes in the empirically observable way the diagnostic claims. The diagnostic treats Spiral Dynamics the way an empirical researcher might treat a useful but imperfect measurement instrument: applying it carefully, reporting results with appropriate uncertainty, and remaining ready to migrate to better instruments as they become available.

3 · THE LEVELS

The Cognitive Levels Relevant to Founder Assessment

Six levels in the Spiral Dynamics framework appear in venture-relevant founder populations. The diagnostic focuses on three that account for the substantial majority of observed founder operating modes.

Of the levels described in Spiral Dynamics theory, three are the operationally dominant modes in founder populations: Blue (rule-based, structure-oriented), Orange (achievement-oriented, strategically rational), and Yellow (systems-integrating, complexity-comfortable). Two additional levels — Red and Green — appear in specific founder profiles and are scored when present. Turquoise, the highest level Spiral Dynamics describes, is present at the trace level in some founders but rarely as primary operating mode in venture-backed companies. The diagnostic specifies what each level looks like in founder behavior, what its strengths and limitations are, and what its presence as primary mode predicts about company trajectory.

Red · Impulsive, Power-Oriented

In founders: Dominant focus on personal power, control, and conquest. Decisions driven by ego and direct competitive impulse. Strong charismatic capacity. Limited tolerance for constraint, accountability, or collaboration.

Pure Red is uncommon in venture-funded founders because the screening filters tend to exclude it, but Red traces appear in founders who present as visionary or driven and reveal Red dominance under pressure. Founders with Red primary mode produce volatile companies: occasional breakout success when the Red drive aligns with market opportunity, more frequent collapse when the same drive prevents the team coordination or institutional discipline that scaling requires. Red founders rarely build durable hypergrowth companies because the cognitive limitations that accompany Red — limited perspective-taking, limited systems thinking, limited capacity to delay gratification — become binding constraints by Series B.

Blue · Rule-Based, Structure-Oriented

In founders: Strong commitment to process, structure, and established frameworks. Reliable execution against defined plans. Comfort with hierarchy, documentation, and discipline. Limited improvisational capacity in genuinely novel situations.

Blue is highly functional in specific stages and archetypes — companies that benefit from disciplined execution against well-understood playbooks, regulated industries where process compliance matters substantially, B2B sales-led companies where consistent execution against established methodologies dominates outcomes. Blue founders build robust mid-market

companies and sometimes navigate to unicorn outcomes in markets where execution discipline is the binding constraint. They tend to struggle in genuinely novel categories where the playbook is not yet written, and they tend to hit ceilings when company scale requires holding genuinely conflicting strategic considerations in tension rather than resolving them by reference to established frameworks.

Orange · Achievement-Oriented, Strategically Rational

In founders: Strong drive toward measurable achievement and competitive winning. Comfort with strategic complexity expressed through frameworks. Comfort with hierarchical organizations optimized for execution. Strategic rationality as primary mode of decision-making.

Orange is the dominant mode of mainstream venture-backed founders and accounts for a substantial majority of founders in the broader portfolio across most archetypes. Orange founders excel at the standard activities venture rewards: setting ambitious targets, organizing teams to execute against them, building competitive advantages, optimizing for measurable outcomes. They are highly capable operators. Their characteristic limitations emerge when company complexity outgrows what strategic rationality alone can navigate — when multiple strategic objectives genuinely conflict in ways no rational framework resolves, when the relevant complexity is human and relational rather than strategic, and when the company faces transitions requiring cognitive modes Orange does not contain. Many strong Orange founders hit ceilings at approximately Series C scale and do not migrate the company through the transitions hypergrowth requires.

Green · Egalitarian, Relationally-Oriented

In founders: Primary orientation toward inclusion, relationships, and consensus. Strong empathy and stakeholder awareness. Comfort with non-hierarchical organizational forms. Limited tolerance for the hierarchical action and competitive aggression that venture often requires.

Green is rare as a primary mode in venture-funded founders, both because the screening filters tend to underweight it and because Green primary mode often produces companies optimized for stakeholder welfare rather than for capital-efficient hypergrowth. Green capacity as a secondary mode is observable in some hypergrowth founders and contributes meaningful capability — particularly in customer empathy, team building under pressure, and the relational dimensions of executive leadership. But Green as primary operating mode rarely produces unicorn-scale companies because the cognitive orientation toward consensus and inclusion frequently conflicts with the decisive, hierarchical, competitively-oriented action that hypergrowth phases require.

Yellow · Systems-Integrating

In founders: Capacity to perceive systems rather than events. Comfort with genuine complexity, including holding conflicting considerations in productive tension. Ability to integrate multiple operating modes — using Orange achievement when execution demands it, Blue structure when scaling requires it, Green relationship when team-building benefits from it. Decision-making that consciously holds trade-offs rather than resolving by reference to single frameworks.

Yellow is the level most strongly correlated with hypergrowth outcomes in the Borodich portfolio across all archetypes. It is also the rarest level among founder populations as a primary operating mode — observable, in the portfolio's experience, in perhaps five to ten percent of the founders who pass standard venture screening at first meeting. The Yellow founders in the portfolio share a recognizable cognitive signature: they articulate systems rather than describing events, they hold trade-offs explicitly rather than resolving them implicitly, they reason about their own reasoning in ways less complex founders do not, and they flex into Orange, Blue, and occasionally Green modes as conditions require without losing the Yellow integration that organizes the flex.

Turquoise · Holistic, Planetary

In founders: Rare. Operating mode that extends Yellow's systems integration to civilizational, planetary, or generational scale. Tendency to see individual companies as nodes in much larger systems. Capacity to hold long time horizons in active consideration.

Turquoise is rare enough that the diagnostic primarily notes its presence rather than scoring it as a distinct primary mode. Turquoise founders, when they appear, tend to build companies that may or may not produce conventional venture returns but that frequently produce category-defining or generationally significant outcomes. The relationship between Turquoise capacity and hypergrowth as conventionally measured is itself a research question the diagnostic flags rather than answers.

The diagnostic's central finding across the Borodich portfolio: hypergrowth correlates with Yellow primary mode and the flex capacity to operate from Orange, Blue, and Green as conditions require. The single-level founder, however brilliant within their level, tends to hit predictable organizational ceilings.

4 · P R O T O C O L

The Forty-Five-Minute Interview Protocol

Cognitive complexity assessment cannot be conducted through written questionnaire or pattern matching against biographical markers. It requires structured live interview designed to elicit the founder's reasoning rather than to test their preparation.

The diagnostic operationalizes its assessment through a forty-five-minute structured interview conducted in person or over high-quality video. The interview is designed to probe the founder's cognitive operating mode through their reasoning about specific scenarios, their handling of complexity and contradiction, and their meta-cognitive awareness of their own decision-making. The protocol is structured but conversational; the goal is to surface authentic reasoning rather than to administer a test the founder can prepare for in advance.

Block One · Decision Archaeology (15 minutes)

The interviewer asks the founder to describe in detail two or three recent significant decisions they made in their company. The goal is not to evaluate whether the decisions were correct but to observe how the founder reasoned through them. Specific probes include:

- "Walk me through how you arrived at this decision, step by step, including options you considered and rejected."
- "What considerations were in tension with each other? How did you weight them?"
- "What would have changed your decision? Under what conditions would you have decided differently?"
- "Looking back, what do you think you got wrong about this decision, even if the outcome was positive?"

The diagnostic markers from this block: founders who describe decisions as the application of single frameworks ("we chose the option with the higher expected value") score primarily Orange. Founders who describe decisions as resolution by reference to process ("we followed our standard evaluation methodology") score primarily Blue. Founders who describe decisions as the conscious holding of trade-offs ("we knew we were sacrificing X to get Y, and we accepted that because Z") score Yellow capacity. The distinction is not in the quality of decision but in the cognitive architecture revealed through how the decision is articulated.

Block Two · Contradiction Handling (10 minutes)

The interviewer presents the founder with one or two genuine contradictions specific to their business situation and observes how the founder reasons about them. The contradictions are drawn from the founder's actual operating reality, not from hypothetical scenarios. Examples:

- "You've told me you need to move fast on this product launch. You've also told me you need to maintain enterprise-grade quality. Walk me through how you're resolving that tension specifically."
- "Your two most important investors have given you conflicting strategic advice. How are you thinking about that?"
- "You've described your co-founder as essential. You've also described areas where their performance is below what the company needs. How are you holding that?"

The diagnostic markers: founders who resolve contradiction by selecting one pole and minimizing the other score Orange or below. Founders who escape contradiction through procedural reference ("our framework says...") score Blue. Founders who hold the contradiction explicitly as ongoing tension to be managed rather than resolved score Yellow. The distinction emerges with high reliability because authentic contradictions are difficult to resolve and the reasoning architecture is exposed under that difficulty.

Block Three · Mode Flex Assessment (10 minutes)

The interviewer probes the founder's capacity to flex across operating modes by asking about situations that benefit from different cognitive modes than the founder's apparent primary. If the founder appears Yellow primary, probe their Orange capacity:

- "Tell me about a recent quarter where the company simply needed to hit numbers. How did you operate during that period?"
- "Describe a time when you had to be hierarchical and directive rather than consultative."
- "What does ruthless execution look like in your operating style when conditions require it?"

If the founder appears Orange primary, probe Yellow capacity through questions about complex strategic situations the standard achievement framework does not fully resolve. If Blue primary, probe Orange and Yellow capacity. The goal is to test the founder's range, not to confirm their primary mode.

Diagnostic markers: founders who exhibit narrow flex range produce vivid description of their primary mode but generic or visibly unfamiliar description of adjacent modes. Founders with substantial flex range describe multiple modes with the same specificity and ease, indicating genuine operational experience across modes rather than theoretical awareness of them.

Block Four · Meta-Cognitive Awareness (10 minutes)

The final block probes the founder's awareness of their own reasoning patterns. Founders with Yellow capacity tend to have substantial meta-cognitive awareness — they reason about their reasoning, notice their characteristic biases, and adjust mode when conditions warrant. Specific probes:

- "What's your characteristic cognitive failure mode? Where do you systematically reason poorly?"
- "In what situations do you find yourself overconfident? Underconfident?"
- "When are you Orange? When are you Blue? When does your team need you to be something else?"
- "What do you think you're getting wrong, right now, about your company?"

Diagnostic markers: founders who cannot articulate their cognitive failure modes generally lack meta-cognitive awareness, which strongly correlates with lower flex capacity. Founders who articulate failure modes precisely, with examples and counter-strategies, exhibit meta-cognitive awareness consistent with Yellow capacity. The block also surfaces what the diagnostic calls the "theater test" — founders sometimes deliver memorized self-awareness without actual underlying meta-cognition, and the theater is detectable because the articulation feels rehearsed rather than discovered in the moment.

Composite Scoring

The four blocks produce four sub-assessments that combine into a composite founder cognitive profile.

Founder Cognitive Profile: Primary level — the level the founder most consistently operates from across the four blocks (typically scored Blue, Orange, or Yellow) Flex capacity range — the levels the founder can demonstrably operate from when conditions require (scored as additional modes beyond primary) Meta-cognitive awareness — the founder's reflexive understanding of their own reasoning (scored 0.0 to 1.0) Stage appropriateness — how well the founder's profile matches the stage demands the company currently faces (scored 0.0 to 1.0)

The composite is interpretive rather than mechanical. A founder with Yellow primary, Orange-Blue-Green flex, high meta-cognition, and stage-appropriate profile represents the strongest pattern the diagnostic identifies. A founder with Orange primary, narrow flex (only Orange or Orange-Blue), modest meta-cognition, and stage-mismatched profile represents the most common pattern in funded companies that fail to reach hypergrowth. The diagnostic provides structured signal; the investment decision integrates that signal with other dimensions of the broader UNLMTD.Growth Methodology.

5 · CASE STUDIES

Three Worked Cases

The diagnostic applied to three founder profiles from the broader portfolio experience — one unicorn outcome, one stagnated company, one failure. Names and identifying details have been altered; cognitive signatures are accurate.

Each case study below illustrates the diagnostic in operation, with cognitive assessment timed to within twelve months of the company's investment decision. The cases are composite where necessary to protect portfolio confidentiality while preserving the cognitive patterns that the diagnostic actually detected.

Case 1 · Unicorn Founder, Yellow Primary

Profile: Solo founder of an enterprise B2B company; technical background but extensive prior operating experience; mid-30s at founding; company crossed unicorn threshold approximately five years post-investment.

Block One — Decision Archaeology

The founder described a recent decision about whether to pursue an opportunity to expand into a major adjacent market that would have produced substantial near-term revenue. The articulation surfaced explicit consideration of four competing factors: revenue acceleration vs strategic focus, talent recruitment implications, capital efficiency vs market positioning, and the founder's own operating bandwidth. The founder did not resolve the considerations by reference to a single framework. They described holding the trade-off explicitly, the values they were prioritizing, and the costs they were accepting.

Block Two — Contradiction Handling

Presented with a contradiction between investor expectation for accelerated growth and the founder's assessment that further infrastructure investment was needed before growth could be sustained, the founder articulated the contradiction explicitly, described why each pole was real and important, and described their current management of the tension. The founder did not select one pole and dismiss the other; they treated the tension as an ongoing strategic condition to be managed.

Block Three — Mode Flex

Asked about a recent quarter where ruthless execution was required, the founder described a specific period of operational discipline with concrete tactical examples. The Orange capacity was visible and operationally fluent. Asked about consensus-building with a difficult co-founder relationship, the founder described Green-mode behavior with similar specificity. Flex range across Orange, Blue, and Green was substantial.

Block Four — Meta-Cognition

The founder articulated specific cognitive failure modes with examples: tendency to underweight near-term tactical considerations when focused on long-term systems thinking, tendency to defer hard conversations with team members where the relational cost felt large. The articulation was specific, accompanied by counter-strategies, and surfaced in the conversation rather than appearing rehearsed.

Composite Assessment: Yellow primary with strong Orange-Blue-Green flex; high meta-cognitive awareness; stage-appropriate profile for early-stage technology company. The diagnostic would have flagged this founder as fitting the hypergrowth pattern, consistent with the actual outcome.

Case 2 · Stagnated Founder, Orange Primary, Narrow Flex

Profile: Solo founder of a successful early-stage B2B company; strong technical and operational background; mid-30s at founding; company reached approximately Series C scale but plateaued and never achieved hypergrowth trajectory despite genuinely strong underlying business.

Block One — Decision Archaeology

Asked about a recent significant decision, the founder described a major product strategic choice with high articulacy and confidence. The decision was characterized as the optimal application of a standard strategic evaluation framework. When probed about considerations in tension, the founder consistently framed them as resolved by reference to the framework rather than as genuine trade-offs requiring conscious holding. Strong Orange capacity; limited Yellow signal.

Block Two — Contradiction Handling

Presented with a contradiction the founder was actively facing — competing investor recommendations on strategic direction — the founder described their resolution: they had concluded one investor was correct and the other was wrong, and were acting accordingly. The contradiction was resolved by selecting one pole rather than held as ongoing tension. The founder's reasoning was articulate and well-supported, but the cognitive architecture was Orange resolution rather than Yellow integration.

Block Three — Mode Flex

Strong fluency in Orange mode across multiple operating contexts. Moderate fluency in Blue mode (the founder operated with reasonable process discipline). Limited fluency in Green or Yellow modes — when asked about consensus-building or holding complex strategic tension, the founder's responses were generic rather than specific, indicating theoretical awareness rather than operational experience.

Block Four — Meta-Cognition

Modest meta-cognitive awareness. The founder could identify cognitive tendencies at the level of style ("I'm aggressive," "I'm a fast decision-maker") but had difficulty articulating specific reasoning failure modes with examples or counter-strategies. The meta-cognitive layer was thin.

Composite Assessment: Orange primary with narrow Orange-Blue flex; modest meta-cognitive awareness; profile became stage-inappropriate as company grew past Series C and faced strategic complexity requiring Yellow integration. The diagnostic would have flagged limited hypergrowth probability, consistent with the actual stagnation outcome.

Case 3 · Failed Founder, Red-Orange Profile with Hidden Brittleness

Profile: Solo founder of a consumer-facing company; charismatic and high-profile background; late 30s at founding; company raised substantially, attracted significant talent, then collapsed approximately three years post-investment in a manner that destroyed substantial capital.

Block One — Decision Archaeology

Asked about a recent significant decision, the founder described a major market expansion choice. The articulation was confident and visionary but elided the specific considerations that should have weighted against the decision. When probed about what considerations were in tension, the founder dismissed the tensions — competitive risk was "not a concern," capital efficiency was "not the constraint," team capacity was "already addressed." The dismissal was characteristic of Red operating mode dressed in Orange vocabulary.

Block Two — Contradiction Handling

Presented with a genuine contradiction the founder faced — the gap between public narrative about the company's growth and internal data the founder knew showed weaker fundamentals — the founder defended the public narrative rather than acknowledging the gap. The defense was sophisticated but did not engage with the contradiction itself. Red mode under pressure; theatrical Orange under normal conditions.

Block Three — Mode Flex

Vivid charismatic mode under normal conditions; visibly Red mode under direct pressure. Blue mode entirely absent — the founder had no operational fluency in process discipline or structured execution. Green mode performed but not authentic — the founder spoke about team welfare in ways that did not match observable team dynamics. Yellow mode entirely absent.

Block Four — Meta-Cognition

Near-zero authentic meta-cognitive awareness despite verbal performance of self-awareness. The founder could deliver a rehearsed account of personal growth and lessons learned, but the account was decoupled from current operating behavior. Asked to identify a current cognitive failure mode, the founder produced abstractions rather than specifics, and the abstractions did not match the patterns observable in their own decision archaeology from Block One.

Composite Assessment: Red primary with theatrical Orange overlay; minimal flex range; very low authentic meta-cognition; stage-inappropriate profile for any growth phase. The diagnostic would have flagged severe risk, but the founder's charismatic capacity may have made the warning easy to dismiss against the prevailing pattern matching that favored the founder profile. The collapse, when it occurred, matched the diagnostic's pre-investment assessment.

Across the three cases, the diagnostic produced cognitive assessments that strongly predicted subsequent outcomes — successful hypergrowth in the Yellow profile, plateaued growth in the Orange-narrow profile, catastrophic collapse in the Red-theatrical profile. The patterns are statistical not deterministic; individual founders may exceed or fall short of their cognitive profile's typical trajectory.

6 · PREDICTIVE AMBIGUITY

What This Diagnostic Cannot Yet Establish

The diagnostic produces interpretive signal under uncertainty, not deterministic prediction. The honest treatment requires explicit engagement with what the signal does not establish.

Like the other published artifacts of the UNLMTD.Growth Methodology, the Founder Spiral Diagnostic faces a structural challenge: retrospective coherence is not predictive clarity. The case studies in Chapter 5 read with the benefit of knowing how the companies subsequently performed. Real-time application of the diagnostic, conducted without outcome knowledge, faces sources of uncertainty that retrospective analysis does not.

Sources of Real-Time Uncertainty

Observer variance in level assignment

Two competent interviewers conducting the diagnostic on the same founder may differ in their level assignment by half a level or more. Yellow versus Orange-with-strong-Yellow-aspirations is a difficult distinction to make under realistic interview conditions, and the boundaries between adjacent levels are not as crisp as the categorical vocabulary implies. Inter-rater reliability work — currently being built as part of the broader UNLMTD.Growth methodology consolidation — will quantify this variance and inform appropriate confidence intervals on individual assessments.

State versus trait confusion

Founders sometimes operate from cognitive modes that do not reflect their typical functioning — fatigue, stress, fundraising mode, recent personal events. A single forty-five-minute interview may capture a state rather than a trait. The diagnostic recommends multiple interview occasions for high-stakes investment decisions, but this is not always operationally feasible in deal timelines. Confidence intervals should widen for single-interview assessments compared to multi-interview ones.

Theatrical performance

Sophisticated founders who have read developmental psychology literature or who have been coached for venture pitches may produce verbal performance that simulates higher cognitive levels than they authentically operate from. The diagnostic's interview protocol includes probes designed to detect theatrical performance — particularly through Decision Archaeology, where authentic cognitive architecture is exposed in the specific texture of how decisions are reasoned through — but theatrical performance remains a real source of measurement error and grows more sophisticated as the framework's vocabulary spreads.

A second-order risk emerges around analyst detection capability. Analysts may begin to over-trust their ability to detect authentic versus theatrical performance, and humans are notoriously poor at this discrimination, particularly with charismatic founders, high-status founders, founders from culturally familiar backgrounds, and emotionally persuasive operators. The same charismatic capacity that enables theatrical performance also activates the analyst's pattern-matching toward favorable interpretation. Analysts trained in the diagnostic should hold their authenticity assessments with substantial epistemic humility — the failure mode of over-confident anti-theater detection is, in practice, often more dangerous than the original failure mode of being deceived by theater. The diagnostic recommends that analysts cross-reference their authenticity assessments with independent observers when stakes are high and time permits.

Founder development over time

Cognitive complexity is not fixed. Founders develop, sometimes dramatically, particularly under the conditions company-building creates. A founder assessed as Orange-primary at seed may be operating at Yellow-primary by Series B through the developmental work company-building forces. The diagnostic captures a moment; the developmental trajectory is itself a relevant signal but harder to assess prospectively. This is a genuine limitation that empirical work over multiple years will progressively address.

Yellow as success-shaped interpretive gravity

The deepest epistemic instability in the diagnostic is the risk that Yellow classification functions as retrospective projection rather than as prospective signal. A founder whose company succeeds is observed in interview, the analyst notices systems thinking and flex capacity, and the founder is classified Yellow. A founder whose company fails is observed in interview, the same cognitive markers are present, but the analyst interprets them differently — perhaps as theatrical sophistication or as Yellow capacity that proved insufficient against execution constraints. The classification becomes outcome-shaped rather than predictor-shaped.

This is a deep and not fully resolvable problem at the current stage of empirical work. Human cognition assessment is inherently elastic; the same observable behavior admits multiple interpretations, and the interpretation an analyst arrives at is influenced by information about outcomes the analyst should not have when scoring prospectively. The Decision Archaeology block partially addresses this by anchoring assessment to specific verifiable founder reasoning rather than to general impressions, but even structured probes admit interpretive variance that retrospective knowledge biases.

The diagnostic's response is not to claim this risk is solved but to commit to the infrastructure that makes the risk progressively measurable. The prospective registry described below is not optional methodology improvement. It is foundational legitimacy infrastructure. Without timestamped pre-outcome assessments tracked against subsequent results, the diagnostic

remains permanently vulnerable to the retrospective projection critique, and any predictive claims it makes are weaker than the diagnostic itself appears to support. With the registry, the framework progressively demonstrates that its Yellow classifications predict trajectory rather than merely describe outcomes already known. The registry is therefore the single most important calibration commitment in the methodology.

The Calibration Agenda

The diagnostic's response to these uncertainties parallels the response in the other published working papers: explicit commitment to ongoing calibration as the evidence base accumulates.

- **Real-time assessment timestamping:** every founder entering the active UNLMTD.Capital pipeline receives a diagnostic assessment at time of investment decision, with the assessment and reasoning timestamped and stored. Multi-year outcomes will be tracked against initial assessments and the calibration gap reported. This includes cases where the diagnostic predicted poorly.
- **Inter-rater reliability measurement:** multiple interviewers conducting the diagnostic on the same founders independently, with agreement rates, level-assignment variance, and disagreement patterns measured and reported. High variance areas indicate where the diagnostic produces unstable signal and where wider confidence intervals are appropriate.
- **Longitudinal founder tracking:** for portfolio founders, periodic re-assessment to measure cognitive development trajectory and its relationship to company outcomes. This addresses the state-versus-trait and development-over-time concerns directly.
- **Cross-framework triangulation:** for selected high-stakes assessments, application of converging frameworks (Kegan instruments, integrative complexity scoring of the founder's written communications) alongside the Spiral Dynamics diagnostic, with agreement rates between frameworks reported as evidence of underlying phenomenon validity.

None of these calibration mechanisms will produce mature results in less than several years. The diagnostic is published now, in advance of mature validation, because the operational signal it has produced in the Borodich portfolio over three years of application is sufficient to justify external engagement, and because the broader methodology benefits from having all its named contributions specified in published form even as the empirical infrastructure around them continues to develop.

A diagnostic that publishes its assessments timestamped, against subsequent outcomes, and including cases where its assessments proved wrong, is a diagnostic willing to be falsified. That willingness is the precondition for being taken seriously.

7 · APPLICATION

Application Protocols

The diagnostic serves three audiences: investors evaluating founder profiles in investment decisions, founders evaluating their own cognitive profile, and accelerator or coaching contexts where developmental tracking matters.

For Investors

The diagnostic integrates into early-stage investment evaluation at three points.

Pre-meeting hypothesis

Before first founder meeting, the analyst forms a preliminary hypothesis about the founder's likely cognitive profile from observable signals — published writing, interview transcripts, talk recordings, prior company history. The hypothesis is held lightly and explicitly probed for falsification rather than confirmation during the actual interview. Many founders score differently in live interview than their public materials suggest, in both directions.

Dedicated diagnostic interview

For deals proceeding past initial qualification, conduct the forty-five-minute diagnostic interview as a dedicated meeting rather than embedded within a general partner meeting. The protocol requires sustained attention to the founder's reasoning architecture, and that attention is not compatible with the multiple agendas a typical partner meeting carries. The dedicated interview signals to the founder that cognitive assessment is taken seriously, which often produces more authentic engagement than embedding the assessment within other conversations.

Co-founder dynamic assessment

For founding teams of two or more, conduct individual diagnostic interviews on each co-founder separately, plus a joint interview observing how the co-founders engage with each other under complexity. The cognitive complementarity (or incompatibility) of the founding team is itself diagnostic; teams where co-founders operate at compatible but distinct cognitive levels often produce stronger outcomes than teams where co-founders operate at the same level or at incompatible levels. This intersects with the broader Team Field Diagnostic anticipated as a future working paper.

For Founders

The diagnostic serves founders as both a developmental mirror and a directional roadmap.

Self-assessment

Founders can apply the diagnostic to themselves through structured self-interview, ideally with a trusted advisor or coach conducting the interview rather than self-administering. Self-administered cognitive complexity assessment is unreliable for the same reason therapy is rarely effective when self-administered: the cognitive structures being assessed are not fully visible from inside the structures themselves. Founders attempting honest self-assessment should pair it with assessment from at least one external observer.

Developmental direction

For founders identifying as Orange-primary or Blue-primary with limited flex, the developmental direction the diagnostic implies is not aspirational but operational. Cognitive complexity develops through specific practices: holding genuine contradictions in active consideration rather than resolving them, working with coaches or therapists trained in adult developmental frameworks, exposure to peers operating at higher cognitive levels, and the conditions company-building itself creates. The diagnostic does not produce development; it produces clarity about where development would be most useful.

For Accelerators and Coaching Contexts

The diagnostic has been applied across multiple cohorts of the 369x Club accelerator program with promising operational signal. Cohort-level diagnostic produces useful sorting: founders at higher cognitive levels with stronger flex tend to extract more value from accelerator programming and tend to produce stronger outcomes regardless of accelerator participation. The signal may inform admission decisions, but more importantly informs how programming is differentiated across cohort members with different cognitive profiles.

The diagnostic is not a sorting hat. It is a structured methodology for surfacing a cognitive property that affects outcomes, applied with appropriate epistemic humility about what the methodology can and cannot establish.

8 · LIMITATIONS

Limitations and Honest Engagement With Criticism

The diagnostic faces legitimate criticism on multiple dimensions. The honest treatment requires direct engagement rather than dismissal.

What the Diagnostic Does Not Capture

The diagnostic measures cognitive complexity and flex capacity. It does not measure intelligence, technical depth, domain expertise, energy, work ethic, integrity, market timing, capital efficiency, distribution capability, or any of the other dimensions that contribute to venture outcomes. A founder with high diagnostic scores who lacks domain expertise, or who is operating in the wrong market, or who simply does not work hard enough, will fail despite the cognitive profile. The diagnostic is one signal among many.

In practical application, the diagnostic should be one input into a broader scoring framework, not a sole basis for decision. A composite UNLMTD.Growth assessment integrating Trend Velocity, AGV Density, founder cognitive complexity, plan velocity, team field coherence, and other named contributions provides substantially more decision-useful signal than any single dimension alone.

Engagement With Pseudo-Science Criticism

The contested status of Spiral Dynamics

Spiral Dynamics has been criticized within academic psychology as insufficiently empirically validated, as lacking standardized assessment instruments, as vulnerable to cultural bias in its description of higher levels, and as susceptible to misuse by practitioners who treat the framework as established science rather than as interpretive heuristic. These criticisms are substantially correct, and the diagnostic should be applied with full awareness of them rather than with dismissal.

The diagnostic's response is not to defend Spiral Dynamics as validated science. It is to position the framework as a useful interpretive vocabulary that operationalizes a phenomenon described by multiple converging developmental frameworks. The phenomenon — variation in adult cognitive complexity with implications for decision-making under uncertainty — is well-established in adult developmental research, even if the specific vocabulary Spiral Dynamics uses to describe it is not. If Spiral Dynamics were definitively superseded as a developmental framework, the diagnostic would migrate to Kegan vocabulary or integrative complexity vocabulary while preserving the underlying assessment methodology. The phenomenon is the foundation; the vocabulary is interpretive.

Falsifiability concerns

A common criticism of Spiral Dynamics in academic contexts is that practitioner claims about the framework are often unfalsifiable — any observed behavior can be reinterpreted as compatible with the framework. The diagnostic addresses this concern directly through its calibration agenda: timestamped assessments tracked against subsequent outcomes, inter-rater reliability measurement, cross-framework triangulation, and explicit acknowledgment of cases where the diagnostic predicts poorly. The diagnostic is designed to be falsifiable in ways much practitioner use of Spiral Dynamics is not.

Cultural bias concerns

Critics have argued that Spiral Dynamics' description of higher levels (Yellow and Turquoise specifically) carries Western philosophical assumptions that may not generalize across cultures, and that the framework's developmental ordering may encode cultural bias rather than universal cognitive development. This concern is partially valid and should be held in mind when applying the diagnostic across founder populations from different cultural backgrounds. The diagnostic's reliance on cross-framework triangulation partially addresses this — converging assessment from Kegan instruments or integrative complexity scoring provides cultural cross-validation — but the concern remains real and warrants ongoing methodological attention.

Methodological Limitations

Sample size and selection bias

The diagnostic's empirical foundation is the Borodich portfolio of approximately 120 companies and the broader 369x Club cohort experience over several years. This is a small and non-random sample. The patterns observed within the sample may not generalize to other portfolios, geographies, archetypes, or eras. Larger and more diverse empirical samples are required before strong claims about the diagnostic's predictive validity can be defended; the calibration agenda is structured to generate that larger sample over coming years.

Founder gaming as framework spreads

As the diagnostic's vocabulary becomes more widely known, sophisticated founders may prepare for the interview in ways that produce theatrical performance of higher cognitive levels. The Decision Archaeology block is the primary defense against this, because authentic cognitive architecture is exposed in the specific texture of how decisions are reasoned through in ways theatrical preparation finds difficult to fake. But the gaming risk grows with framework familiarity, and analysts applying the diagnostic in years three and four of its existence should apply more skepticism to assessments than analysts in year one.

Interviewer skill dependency

The diagnostic's reliability depends substantially on interviewer skill — specifically, the interviewer's own cognitive complexity and meta-cognitive awareness, their experience with

adult developmental frameworks, and their capacity to conduct probing conversation under varying founder personalities. This is a genuine limitation that scales-poorly: the diagnostic cannot be applied uniformly across many analysts without substantial training infrastructure that does not yet exist. Building training methodology for diagnostic interviewers is part of the consolidation phase the broader methodology is now entering.

Trust-Constrained Application

The diagnostic should not be applied as a sorting mechanism that gates founders from access to capital, mentorship, or opportunity. Cognitive complexity at the moment of assessment is not a fixed trait; founders develop, sometimes dramatically. The diagnostic produces signal about likely trajectory under current cognitive operating conditions, not signal about founder worth or fundamental capability. Using diagnostic assessment as a hard filter rather than as one of multiple inputs would be both methodologically inappropriate (the diagnostic is not validated enough to support that use) and ethically inappropriate (it would systematically exclude founders whose current cognitive profile may not reflect their future operating capacity).

Cognitive Complexity Is Not Human Worth

This section exists because the territory the diagnostic enters demands an explicit ethical statement that no methodological caveat can substitute for. As frameworks like this spread in the venture ecosystem, they risk being reinterpreted as developmental hierarchies between humans rather than as context-specific cognitive assessments. The risk is not hypothetical. Adjacent frameworks in the broader Spiral Dynamics tradition have been deployed irresponsibly to characterize people as more or less evolved, to justify status hierarchies, and to create developmental caste systems within communities that adopt them. The diagnostic explicitly rejects this trajectory.

Five claims must be held simultaneously, and each is foundational to the diagnostic's responsible application.

- **Cognitive complexity develops.** It is not fixed at any moment of assessment. A founder operating from Orange primary mode today may develop substantial Yellow capacity over subsequent years through specific developmental work, exposure, and the conditions company-building creates. Assessment captures a moment; the moment does not predict a permanent ceiling.
- **Cognitive complexity is contextual.** The complexity required to navigate venture-backed company-building under uncertainty is one specific kind of complexity. It does not correspond to general intelligence, to moral sophistication, to wisdom, to depth of experience, or to capacity for other human domains. A person operating at Blue primary in venture context may operate at higher complexity than any of the diagnostic's other levels capture in artistic creation, parenting, scientific research, or other domains the diagnostic does not measure.

- **Developmental stage is not moral worth.** Nothing in the diagnostic implies that founders with higher cognitive complexity are better people, more deserving of respect, more entitled to capital, or more valuable to their families, communities, and institutions. The framework measures one specific cognitive capacity relevant to one specific outcome. The framework is silent on every other dimension of human value, and explicitly declines any extension into those dimensions.
- **Low complexity is not low capability.** The diagnostic identifies cognitive profiles correlated with venture hypergrowth outcomes. It does not identify cognitive profiles unsuited to founding, leading, building, contributing, or succeeding by any other measure. Many of the most important human endeavors do not require the specific cognitive complexity the diagnostic measures, and rewarding only that complexity would systematically devalue capacities that are equally or more important to civilization.
- **Founder capability is multidimensional.** Cognitive complexity is one dimension of founder capability. Domain expertise, technical depth, integrity, work ethic, energy, relational capacity, learning velocity, resilience, and many other dimensions matter in ways the diagnostic does not capture. A composite assessment that includes cognitive complexity alongside these other dimensions provides more useful signal than any single dimension alone, and reduces the risk that cognitive assessment is overweighted relative to its actual contribution to outcomes.

These claims are not legal disclaimers or methodological hedges. They are the ethical foundation on which the diagnostic must rest if it is to be responsibly applied. A version of the diagnostic that does not hold all five claims simultaneously is a different framework — one the authors do not endorse, and one whose deployment in the venture ecosystem would represent the failure mode this paper exists in part to prevent.

Future Work

Six extensions of the diagnostic are anticipated as the methodology matures.

1. **Prospective founder registry:** as emphasized in the Predictive Ambiguity chapter, a timestamped registry of pre-outcome diagnostic assessments tracked against subsequent company trajectories is not optional methodology improvement but foundational legitimacy infrastructure. Without it, the diagnostic cannot escape retrospective projection concerns. Building the registry is the single highest-priority calibration commitment in the methodology.
2. **Interviewer certification architecture:** the diagnostic's reliability depends substantially on interviewer skill, and scaling without consistency mechanisms would risk corrupting the framework. A structured certification pathway — training curriculum, supervised assessment practice, calibration against canonical examples, ongoing peer review — must precede broad adoption. This is operational infrastructure rather than further theoretical development.

3. Inter-rater reliability measurement: multiple-analyst assessment with measured agreement rates, level-assignment variance, and disagreement pattern analysis, producing quantitative grounding for confidence intervals on individual assessments.
4. Cross-framework empirical comparison: systematic application of Kegan instruments and integrative complexity scoring alongside the Spiral Dynamics diagnostic on the same founder populations, with agreement rates between frameworks reported as evidence of underlying phenomenon validity. Long-term, the methodology may migrate toward vocabulary drawn from more academically validated frameworks while preserving the underlying assessment approach.
5. Longitudinal developmental tracking: cohort studies of founders assessed at seed, Series B, and Series D stages, documenting the developmental trajectories that company-building produces and identifying which developmental moves correlate with sustained company-stage progression.
6. Cross-cultural validation: application of the diagnostic across founder populations from diverse cultural backgrounds, with explicit examination of whether the framework's developmental ordering generalizes and where cultural adjustment is required.

Each of these extensions requires empirical or infrastructure work that will mature over multiple years. The diagnostic is published now in advance of that maturation, on the principle that providing structured methodology is the precondition for accumulating the empirical base that ultimately validates or refines it. The first two priorities — prospective registry and interviewer certification — are the operational prerequisites for responsible scaling and should be treated as binding rather than aspirational.

CONCLUSION

In Summary

Founder cognitive complexity is one of the most predictive but least systematically measured dimensions of venture outcomes. Standard founder evaluation methodologies — track record, reference checks, pattern matching — capture downstream observables of cognitive complexity without directly assessing the upstream property itself, producing the prediction errors that contribute to venture's characteristic high failure rate among funded companies.

The Borodich Founder Spiral Diagnostic operationalizes cognitive complexity assessment through a forty-five-minute structured interview using Spiral Dynamics as primary interpretive vocabulary, with explicit acknowledgment that the underlying phenomenon is described by several converging developmental frameworks. The diagnostic produces a composite founder cognitive profile capturing primary level, flex capacity range, meta-cognitive awareness, and stage appropriateness, which integrates with the broader UNLMTD.Growth Methodology as one input among multiple decision-relevant signals.

The central empirical observation across the Borodich portfolio: founders whose companies reach hypergrowth tend strongly to operate from Yellow primary mode with substantial flex into Orange, Blue, and Green as conditions require. Founders confined to single cognitive levels, however brilliant within them, tend to hit predictable organizational ceilings. The observation is statistical not deterministic, and the diagnostic produces probabilistic signal under uncertainty rather than deterministic prediction.

The diagnostic is published now with explicit epistemic discipline: scope statement limiting claims to venture context with multi-year validation horizon, causal humility distinguishing correlation from causation, calibration agenda committing to timestamped assessments and inter-rater reliability measurement, and substantial limitations chapter engaging directly with criticism that Spiral Dynamics faces in academic psychology. The methodology is positioned as a probabilistic interpretive system under uncertainty, not as definitive cognitive science.

The diagnostic is the third published artifact of the UNLMTD.Growth Methodology, following the Borodich Trend Velocity Model and the UNLMTD AGV Density Framework. Subsequent working papers will develop additional named contributions of the broader methodology, with the eventual UNLMTD.Growth Codex integrating all contributions into a coherent reference document.

The single highest-leverage founder property in venture is not the founder's peak cognitive level. It is the range of cognitive levels across which the founder can flex on demand. The diagnostic exists to make that

range visible to investors who cannot currently see it and to founders who cannot currently see it in themselves.

Alexander Borodich

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Dubai · May 2026

APPENDIX A

Diagnostic Scoring Rubric

This appendix consolidates the diagnostic's scoring rubric for operational use during founder assessment interviews.

A.1 · Primary Level Assignment

Level	Diagnostic Indicators in Founder Reasoning
Yellow	Holds trade-offs explicitly as ongoing tension. Articulates systems rather than events. Demonstrates meta-cognitive awareness with specific examples and counter-strategies. Flexes into multiple modes with operational specificity rather than theoretical reference.
Green	Primary orientation toward consensus, inclusion, and stakeholder welfare. Strong empathy and relational sensitivity. Limited tolerance for hierarchical or competitively-aggressive action. Rarely primary mode in venture-funded founders.
Orange	Resolves trade-offs by application of strategic frameworks. Strong drive toward measurable achievement. Comfort with strategic complexity expressed through frameworks. Most common primary mode in venture-funded founders.
Blue	Strong commitment to process, structure, and established frameworks. Reliable execution against defined plans. Comfort with hierarchy and documentation. Limited improvisational capacity in genuinely novel situations.
Red	Dominant focus on personal power and control. Decisions driven by ego and

Level	Diagnostic Indicators in Founder Reasoning
	competitive impulse. Limited tolerance for constraint or collaboration. Strong charismatic capacity. Often produces theatrical Orange overlay under normal conditions.

A.2 · Flex Capacity Range

In addition to primary level, the diagnostic scores the range of cognitive modes the founder can demonstrably operate from. Flex capacity is measured by the founder's operational specificity when discussing situations that benefit from cognitive modes other than their primary.

Flex Range	Criteria
Wide	Demonstrates operational fluency across three or more cognitive modes with specific examples and counter-strategies. Mode-switching appears authentic rather than performed.
Moderate	Demonstrates fluency in primary mode plus one adjacent mode. Discussion of further modes is generic rather than specific.
Narrow	Strong fluency in primary mode only. Discussion of other modes is theoretical or absent. Frequently the binding constraint as company complexity grows past initial stage.

A.3 · Meta-Cognitive Awareness

Score	Criteria
0.8–1.0	Articulates specific cognitive failure modes with examples and counter-strategies. Reasoning about reasoning is fluent and surfaces in conversation rather than appearing rehearsed. Notices and adjusts during the interview itself.
0.5–0.7	Articulates cognitive tendencies at the level of style. Recognizes some failure modes but with limited specificity. Some meta-cognitive layer present but thin.
0.2–0.4	Performs self-awareness without substantive content. Generic reflections that do not match observable decision patterns. Theatrical meta-cognition rather than authentic.
0.0–0.1	Cannot articulate cognitive failure modes. Reasoning about reasoning is absent or

Score	Criteria
	actively avoided.

A.4 · Composite Profile Interpretation

The composite founder cognitive profile combines primary level, flex range, meta-cognitive awareness, and stage appropriateness. The diagnostic does not produce a single numerical score; it produces an interpretive profile.

Profile Pattern	Outcome Implication
Yellow primary, wide flex, high meta-cognition	Strongest pattern; consistent with hypergrowth trajectories observed in the Borodich portfolio.
Orange primary, moderate flex, moderate meta-cognition	Common pattern in venture-funded founders; supports successful exits but often hits ceilings at Series C scale.
Orange primary, narrow flex, modest meta-cognition	Stagnation risk increases at growth-stage transitions requiring cognitive flex beyond primary mode.
Blue primary, narrow flex, modest meta-cognition	Strong fit for execution-discipline archetypes; weaker fit for genuinely novel categories.
Red primary with theatrical Orange overlay	Severe risk pattern; volatile trajectory with high collapse probability under sustained pressure.

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