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A Hot Topics Paper
Prepared by the SIOP Visibility Committee

Learning Agility

Caitlin Cavanaugh and Alexandra Zelin
The University of Akron

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One of the best predictors for success in a management position is not previous management performance, but rather one's level of learning agility¹. Learning agility refers to a person's desire and ability to learn from experience, and to then apply their learning to other situations². Managers who exhibit people agility (e.g., open minded, self-aware), results agility (e.g., adaptable, flexible, and has drive to complete jobs), mental agility (e.g., curious, finds solutions to difficult problems), and change agility (e.g., likes to experiment, tries new things), as measured and defined by Lombardo and Eichinger³ are most likely to succeed in upper-level

management positions.² These managers do not fall into the trap of completing tasks in the same fashion as before just because they know it works. Instead, they are eager to try out new ideas and learn from their mistakes in order to develop the best, most effective way to solve a problem.

People who are learning agile tend to take more control over their own learning by looking for opportunities to grow, requesting feedback about their work, and continually engaging in self-reflection and evaluation about their work and careers. They learn quickly, trust themselves enough to experiment with new solutions, and apply their new knowledge to novel situations. Unsurprisingly, this means agile learners deliver results for their organizations.

A Brief History

The concept of learning agility developed out of the business world as a personal trait that seemed to be related to identifying individuals who might be most successful in leadership positions. Common sense tells us that promotions should go to the managers who are performing the best; those who excel in current managerial role should be extremely likely to perform well when promoted to a higher management position. Unfortunately, many companies find out to their detriment that this is not always the case^{1, 2, 3}.

Two streams of research—one dealing with why executives fail, and another addressing how experiences improved leader effectiveness—framed the current practice-based understanding of learning agility. While high potential individuals were expected to perform well in new leadership



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roles, research seemed to suggest that less than a third of “high potential” individuals actually succeeded in more broad-based, senior-level positions. Additionally, although general intelligence predicts employee success for their first job, it does not influence employee success once they are promoted to a higher management position^{1,3}. What does have an impact on a manager’s performance once promoted is their learning agility. The realization that individuals differ in their ability to learn from experience emerged as an important factor in determining future successes on the job, thereby catapulting learning agility to the forefront of research and practice.

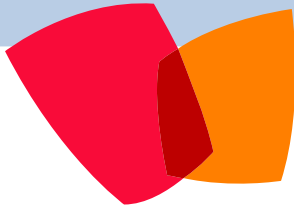
Implications for Practice

“While some aspects of learning agility are reliant on individual traits that may not be easily changed, other aspects can be developed and improved.”

Both practice and research on learning agility suggests several useful applications for the business world. First, age, race, and gender are not related to a person’s learning agility. From an employee selection and hiring standpoint, decision-making using learning agility (where job related) may be a fruitful avenue for future research and practice, as it may not adversely affect protected classes. Second, if organizations want to predict how well an employee might perform in a future position, learning agility may be a better way to determine their

potential than conventional performance-review based promotion. Because learning agility emphasizes the ability to apply current understanding and knowledge to novel situations, it specifically addresses the reality that employees who are promoted will face new and different challenges than they faced in previous positions. Third, organizations can take advantage of learning opportunities to try and improve employees’ learning agility.

While some aspects of learning agility are reliant on individual traits that may not be easily changed, other aspects can be developed and improved. Typically, employees who exhibit traits such as resiliency, the ability to learn from experience, willingness to change, comfort moving away from habits and routines, and who possess a strong need for growth are likely to exhibit high levels of learning agility². However, there are ways to develop these traits in employees who may not have yet developed such skills, which in turn increases their level of learning agility. Rego⁵ describes four ways we can learn, which can improve an individual’s learning agility:



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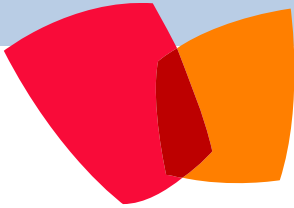
- 1) through **codified knowledge**, including books, classes, and training, which can be useful for learning straightforward information—where there is one answer to a question;
- 2) through **peer learning** such as information shared from mentors, coaches, and others with experience can help by challenging existing perspectives and encouraging people to analyze from different viewpoints;
- 3) by **direct experience**, or trial and error, a practical approach that helps individuals to develop a clear picture of how something should be done by seeing the results first-hand;
- 4) by **reflection** on past experiences, which can include various relaxation activities to bring the mind off of active thoughts and take time to draw insights from previous experiences.

Every opportunity for learning provides an employee a chance to strengthen their knowledge pool, which can then be transferred to other tasks or situations. More specifically, organizations are easily able to help their employees develop learning agility by offering opportunities to reflect and receive feedback (e.g., 360 feedback systems, coaching/mentoring programs, broad training and development initiatives) and encouraging them to take the reins of their development⁴. Giving employees clear opportunities to engage in each of these types of learning can help them become more learning agile in the work place. The more an employee has a chance to learn, to experience, and to reflect, the more that employee will be able to apply their new skills to different job situations and challenges.

One way that has been suggested to develop learning agility with new employees is to present them with many different training experiences early on which require multiple, adaptive responses. This allows the employee to begin thinking outside the box immediately and not become too comfortable with only one method of response⁴. Most importantly, the company must provide a workplace environment that promotes and encourages learning agility in its employees. If the organization does not promote development and change then it is highly unlikely that their employees will exhibit these traits.

Conclusions

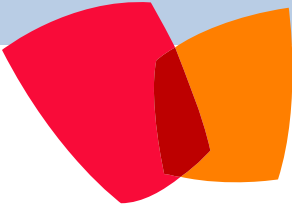
Although not often measured or put into practice in the workplace, learning agility proves to be an important consideration for professionals, especially as it relates to the



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development of high potentials and leaders. Instead of focusing solely on past performance and overall general mental ability, organizations seeking to improve their promotion decisions should consider utilizing learning agility in career development plans, and consider assessing it to predict success in higher level leadership roles. Fortunately, it is easy for companies to measure various dimensions of learning agility and make opportunities available in order to improve learning agility in their employees, thereby increasing the pool of high potential leaders from which promotional decisions can be made. In summary, prioritizing and training aspects of learning agility should improve performance for individuals as well as organizations, and will likely continue to be an important concept to researchers and practitioners alike in the future.

Although not often measured or put into practice in the workplace, learning agility proves to be an important consideration for professionals, especially as it relates to the development of high potentials and leaders.



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Learning Agility Factors

Mental Agility

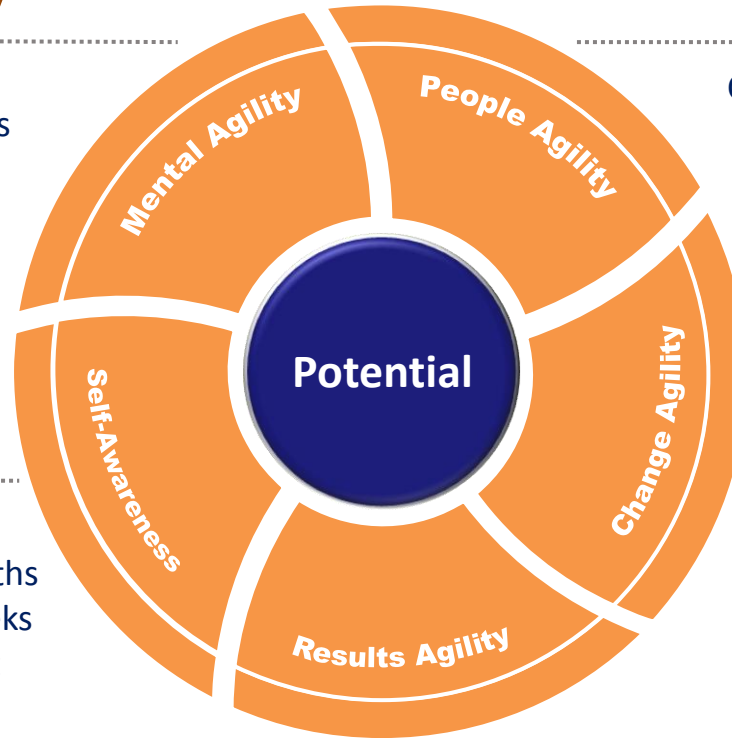
Comfortable with complexity and ambiguity, finds solutions to tough problems, broad interests, highly curious.

People Agility

Can work easily with a diversity of people, politically agile, skilled communicator, manages interpersonal conflict well.

Self-Awareness

Insightful, reflective, clearly understands personal strengths and weaknesses, actively seeks feedback, sensitive of impact on others.



Change Agility

Constant tinkerer (never satisfied), introduces novel perspectives, enjoys leading change efforts, willingly takes heat of any resistance to change.

Results Agility

Delivers results (even in tough situations), resourceful, inspiring, has significant presence, builds high performing teams (if people manager).

Learning Agility Factors/Themes

Learning Agility Factor	Themes Showing . . . <i>Less Learning Agility</i> <i>Tends to be deliberate, systematic, conscientious and traditional. Prefers solutions that are proven & established</i>	Themes Showing . . . <i>More Learning Agility</i> <i>Tends to be curious, flexible, enterprising and adventuresome. Prefers solutions that are bold and new</i>
<p>Mental Agility <i>Working with Concepts and Ideas</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoys going deep in functional area • Is good at working with repeated patterns • Values consistency and order • Prefers working where there is predictability, concreteness, stability and certainty • Values tradition and prefers proven techniques and approaches • Looks for best answers based upon current data and past experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is mentally quick, curious and inquisitive • Reads broadly and has wide interests • Is oriented towards new approaches and complexity • Is comfortable with ambiguity • Changes way of thinking and looking at things over time • Examines problems carefully, and makes fresh connections • Digs deeply into problems to find root causes and helps other improve problem solving • Can clearly explain his/her thinking to others
<p>People Agility <i>Working with and relating to people</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likes to work and socialize with similar people • Treats everyone the same • Prefers defined roles, rules of interaction and responsibilities • Behaves according to personal values and own code of conduct • Prefers to work alone and be held accountable to individual contributions • Avoids conflict with others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspires others to perform at a high level • Is politically agile • Adjusts approach depending upon others' needs and expectations • Gets things done with and through different types of people • Embraces and leverages diversity and is open minded to individual differences • Confronts interpersonal conflict directly and effectively • Is cool and resilient under the pressures of change
<p>Change Agility <i>Tolerance for uncertainty and ability to lead change</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values continuity and reliability • Values established way of doing things and proven solutions • Tends to be highly structured and process oriented • Carefully collects and analyzes data to be sure of successes • Ensures consensus before initiating change • Employs a deliberate approach to performing job. • Has perfectionist tendencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a passion for ideas and continuous improvement • Enjoys experiencing and leading change • Is calm under pressure and uncertainty and handles "heat" of change well • Relishes taking risk • Views problems as an opportunity for change and improvement • Conveys clear vision of desired outcomes • Is bored with sameness, routine and repetitive tasks
<p>Results Agility <i>Preference for how to get things done</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performs well at job duties that are repetitive and where quality standards are defined • Is a steady, conscientious worker • Focuses and likes to accomplish tasks one by one • Is very sensitive to deadlines, can be counted on to complete a job on time and within budget • Prefers to execute job tasks in a consistent manner & to a high standard • Is dependable and reliable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be counted on to get things done in new and tough situations • Is resourceful • Has a high drive for results and is energized by challenging assignments • Emotionally resilient • Enjoys multi-tasking • Has a high level of perseverance, does not give up • Motivates others to perform well • Has significant presence that builds confidence in self and others
<p>Self Awareness <i>Interest in and extent of self reflection</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believes "you know yourself better than others" • Doesn't care much about how others think of him or her • Is self assured about own capabilities • Values people who simply accept others as they are • Focuses on the present and the here and now • Tends to be a private person (not disclosing his or her views, likes, and dislikes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows personal strengths, weaknesses and blind spots • Understands self and not surprised by others feedback • Has an accurate assessment of performance level • Knows the causes of own feelings and moods • Can be candid to a fault about self • Is sensitive of his or her impact on others • Takes corrective action from others to enhance performance