

Practitioner's Corner

HELPING YOUR ORGANIZATION GAIN IN LEARNING AGILITY

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The aim of this article is to discuss the merits of organizational learning agility as it relates to organizational leadership, organizational culture, and the mindset and behavior of the organization. An extensive definition of agility and its importance is presented as a precursor to individual learner agility, leadership agility, and organizational agility. This paper outlines the characteristics of learning agile leaders and employees, how to identify them, and the role the organization must take to increase learning agility. Finally, the benefits of agile learning and leadership are presented while presenting a general view of the process of developing learning agility.

In the past decade, an exceptional amount of attention has been devoted to leadership development and preparing managers for twenty-first century leadership. The topic of many debates has centered on to what category a leader belongs. Is she an autocratic, democratic, transactional, laissez faire, or transformational leader? Does he possess the skills to move this organization to the next plateau? With so much attention centered on leaders, Hughes (as cited in Stopper, 2005) warned there is a growing concern that too much development has been focused on the leader but very little on leadership. The terms leader and leadership are synonymous. Both words depict action and epitomize the act of leading or commanding. However, there are leaders who lead and leaders who are led. According to Kotter (2008), in today's environment a vast majority of U.S. corporations are grossly over-managed and vastly under-led. Successful corporations are ahead of the curve when it comes to developing leadership. They are not in the habit of waiting for someone to come along who has the credentials and characteristics they are looking for. No; they seek out individuals with leadership potential and who are exposed to career experiences that are designed to develop that potential (Kotter, 2008). Often times these individuals are sought from within the corporation. Successful corporations produce successful leaders, and successful leaders help to produce successful organizations.

Successful organizations are agile. That is, they are able to adapt quickly and respond to rapid changes in the markets and global economies. Successful organizations have successful leaders guiding and pointing the way. There are certain characteristics that make up a successful

organization. How are they identified? What are the steps to making a successful leader? How is success identified in leaders?

Defining Agility

In this ever changing, ever evolving world of markets, many organizations stumble, a few fall, and yet some succeed. Organizations that master the dynamics of markets, the rise and fall of stocks, and the revolving door of leadership change succeed due to their flexibility and quickness to respond to turbulence in the business world. It is the difference between having organizational learning agility and not having it. McCann, Selsky, and Lee (2009) defined agility as “the capacity for moving quickly, flexibly and decisively anticipating, initiating and taking advantage of opportunities and avoiding any negative consequences of change” (p. 3). Sull (2010) defined organizational agility as the ability to identify and capture opportunities more quickly than rivals do. A recent McKinsey survey found that nine out of ten business executives identified organizational agility as critical to business success (Sull). Agility is invaluable in the midst of the current financial crisis, instability and market turbulence, and global economic slowdowns. How was British Petroleum (BP) to know that in April 2010 it would enter turbulent waters and star as the face of what could become the worst financial crisis of its existence? Ford Motors has, in the eyes of the public, presented itself as a healthy, vibrant company, out-performing General Motors in sales and revenue as of June 2010. Ford was able to weather the turbulent waters with a good showing, avoiding a huge repayment of bailout funds. It would be fair to say that among Ford’s top management are agile leaders.

Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod (2001) reported that seven percent of organizations surveyed responded positively that their organizations had the management talent needed, yet only three percent agreed with the statement: “We develop people effectively.” Learning agility, as described by Clark and Gottfredson (2008), “refers to an organization’s ability to respond to adaptive challenge-be it an opportunity, threat, or crisis-through the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills” (p. 4). Learning agility amounts to continual acquisition of new knowledge and skills that are acquired during or prior to market changes (Clark & Gottfredson). Organizations rated as low agility organizations are not as quick to respond, while organizations with learning agility quickly respond to constant change. One of the greatest needs of organizations, according to Clark (2008), is having employees who are agile learners and leaders who are open, teachable, flexible, and able to execute complex strategies. Leaders need to be inquisitive about the world and seek new challenges and experiences. Acquiring learning agile people strengthens an organization’s learning agility.

Levitt and March (1988) identified four sources of organizational learning:

- Learning by direct experience;
- Interpretation of history (reflecting shared perspectives);
- Retrieval of knowledge from organizational memory (using established communication channels and routines); and
- Learning from the experience of others.

McCann (2009) stated organizations have an obligation to build agility to perform effectively in turbulent environments. How do organizations improve their learning agility?

Organizational learning agility begins with leadership that recognizes the importance of learning agility. This requires an agile leader who understands the process and the benefits of leading an agile organization.

James McNerney, the CEO of Boeing, said, “Institutionally, the ability to be agile enough is the gut issue in leading and organization today (as cited in Joiner, 2009, p. 29). Leadership agility, according to Joiner, is the ability to effectively lead in turbulent times and the ability to consider multiple views and priorities. Learning agility, as stated by Ryan (2009), is cultivated as leaders are exposed to new challenges coupled with constructive feedback on performance. Leaders must develop a commitment to learning in areas outside of the regular routines and demands of the position. Part of an agile leader’s routine should involve knowledge acquisition, and reading journals, trade magazines, and books to gain a broad perspective on multiple topics. For leaders to do this regularly requires them to get out of their comfort zone. That is where the challenge lies. This is what it takes to build confidence and to remain engaged in daily responsibilities. As important as it is for agile leaders to add to their pool of knowledge and be presented with new challenges, it is just as important for agile leaders to receive feedback on how well they are applying their knowledge and performing. Feedback needs to be constructive and ongoing.

Identifying Agile Leaders and Employees

How are agile leaders identified? Durgin (2006) stated the best way to identify agile leaders is to remember a simple mnemonic: Resourceful, Relationships, Resilient, and Results. Agile leaders have the ability to see connections, listen to others, stay in control and focused under pressure, and are willing to make necessary sacrifices for results. According to Joiner (2009), results of research reveal “that behaviors exhibited by highly agile leaders are made possible by a distinct set of mental and emotional capacities that can be learned and developed” (p. 31). Managers at different stages of development exhibit different leadership behaviors adding to the capabilities acquired at previous stages of development. Joiner stated the level of an organization’s leadership culture has a tremendous effect on the behavior of individual leaders, stressing the importance of assessing the agility level that dominates the organization’s leadership culture while determining the agility levels of individual leaders. For example, Joiner identified the characteristics of Expert, Achiever, and Catalyst leadership cultures:

- In expert leadership cultures, leaders function within silos without any prominence given to cross-functional teamwork. Leaders are highly concentrated in the activities of their subordinates; as a result, their individual roles suffer strategically.
- In achiever leadership cultures, managers are communicative about strategic objectives, ensuring the right people and processes are in place to reach the established goals. This culture is focused on the customer and cross-functional teamwork. Key stakeholders are involved in change initiatives.
- In catalyst leadership cultures, there is an air of excitement that emanates from undeniable presence of vision, overwhelming participation, empowerment, and teamwork. The characteristics of this cultural norm are collaboration, decisiveness, critical thinking, and productive dialogue. Senior teams become prime examples of how teams are to work together. Leaders expand their roles to

that of coach, adviser, and solicitor of feedback that encourages and promotes change behaviors beneficial for the organization.

How does an organization or organizational leader identify employees who have learning agility? According to Joseph (2001), learning-agile people exhibit several common traits (p. 1):

- They are usually critical thinkers who carefully examine problems and make the connections with relative ease.
- They have studied and know themselves well enough to leverage their strengths and compensate for their weakness.
- They are not opposed to change and constantly looking for a challenge.
- They use team-building and personal drive as a means of delivering results.
- They are comfortable with diversity, demonstrating their open-mindedness and nonjudgmental attitude.
- They have strong peer relationships.
- They are comfortable with change and know how and when to pick their battles.

The Role of the Organization

Cashman (2008) argued organizations can cultivate a productive leadership culture where the importance of learning agility is evident. Clark (2008) also noted that engaged employees are far more productive because they are active, energized, and focused on the needs of the organization. Clark stated that employees who are actively engaged and who know they are respected are more likely to accept challenges when they are encouraged by managers and increase productivity. An organization's return on investment is increased by an average of 11.4 percent when employees are engaged (Schneider, 2006). If employees are highly engaged, they are 87 percent less likely to leave their organizations (Clark). O'Toole (2008) concluded no leader, executive, or individual, no matter how gifted, can save a company, nor can that individual be right 100 percent of the time. As one CEO proclaimed, "None of us is as smart as all of us" (as cited in O'Toole, p. 53).

Research findings indicate leadership is an institutional capacity, not solely an individual trait, in many successful companies. Because successful companies have mustered a team of highly skilled leaders, they are able to continue their success no matter how many times the leaders change. These organizations are not so concerned with the character that must be developed in individual leaders. They are more concerned about the qualities that need to be developed in the organization (O'Toole, 2008).

Organizations also need to develop an agility-oriented mindset, as defined in Table 1.

Table 1

Agility-Oriented Mindset and Behaviors

EVERY EMPLOYEE MUST
Understand and Embrace the Essentiality and Essence of Marketplace Agility

Be Proactive	Be Adaptive	Be Generative
<p><u>Initiate</u> Actively search for opportunities to contribute to organizational success and take the lead in pursuing those that appear promising</p>	<p><u>Assume Multiple Roles</u> Perform in multiple capacities across levels, projects, and organizational boundaries – often simultaneously</p>	<p><u>Learn</u> Continuously pursue the attainment of proficiency in multiple competency areas, eschewing over-specialization and complacency</p>
<p><u>Improvise</u> Devise and implement new and creative approaches to pursuing opportunities and dealing with threats</p>	<p><u>Rapidly Redeploy</u> Move quickly from role to role</p>	<p><u>Educate</u> Actively participate in the sharing of information and knowledge through the organization, as well as with its partners and collaborators</p>
	<p><u>Spontaneously Collaborate</u> Engage often and easily with others with a singular focus on task accomplishment (and disengage just as easily when contribution is no longer needed)</p>	

Benefits of Agility

What benefits does agile learning and leadership offer? Durgin (2006) listed four major benefits of agile leadership and transforming agile learners into agile leaders (pp. 8-9):

- Leadership bench strength improves;
- The ability to lead a company through times of change is enhanced;
- Retention of high potential talent increases;
- Business performance improves.

McKinsey survey respondents indicated that the benefits of agility include better showings in revenue, customer and employee satisfaction, operational efficiency, and improved market delivery (Sull, 2010).

Developing agility may involve a five-step process (Durgin, 2006). The process happens shortly after an experience or during an experience in real-time and involves the following steps as identified by Durgin (p. 6):

- Hitting pause;
- Engaging in reality-based self-talk;
- Asking oneself the right questions;
- Adapting to the context of current circumstances;
- Observing the impact of the adaptation.

Woller and Woller (2008) listed four stages of learning: unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence. Those who are unaware of their incompetence generally operate on autopilot, while those who are aware have begun to engage the feedback loop process (Durgin, 2006, p. 7). Becoming aware of competencies is an indication that the agile leader is on the road to developing future competency. Unconscious competence represents learning agile leaders who have made the connection between the parts of the brain affected by the barriers to learning agility above and what it will take to get the job accomplished (Durgin).

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Learning-agile individuals seek opportunities for growth and are able to process these opportunities in order to learn. They are open to new experiences, seek challenges, and are willing to introduce new ideas and question norms. In line with previous research, we have found no significant differences in learning agility scores across gender, age, or organizational level. However, in exploring the relationship between leaders' scores on the LAAI and the Workplace Big Five Profile personality assessment, we have begun to see how learning-agile individuals may show up at work differently than the rest of the population. Organizations grow when their employees are learning. If you want a high growth organization, you need to create a learning ecosystem to support high growth individuals to expose them to new and challenging opportunities before their roles become stale. Companies need to see that a high growth employee who loves to learn is a very valuable asset. Jedlinski was receptive and helped facilitate Bursch's shift to a new role as one of his direct reports. Bursch was able to bring his deep domain expertise in the full software development cycle and learned how to freshly apply it in Product. As Bursch said, "I was really seeking the challenge of aligning technology advancement to support a product vision."