

Improve Your Ability to Learn

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On the surface, John looked like the perfect up-and-coming executive to lead BFC's Asia expansion plans. He went to an Ivy League B-school. His track record was flawless. Every goal or objective the organization had ever put in front of him, he'd crushed without breaking a sweat.

But something broke when John went to Asia. John struggled with the ambiguity, and he didn't take prudent risks. He quickly dismissed several key opportunities to reach out for feedback and guidance from leadership. It became clear that John had succeeded in the past by doing what he knew and operating rather conservatively within his domain. It also became clear that the company was going to massively miss the promises it had made to the Board and the Street if John remained in the role.

With a heavy heart, BFC's CEO removed his promising protégé from the role and redeployed him back in the US. He decided he had no choice but to put a different kind of leader in the role – Alex.

While talented, Alex had come to be known behind closed doors by the moniker "DTM" – difficult to manage. He marched to the beat of his own drummer, and he wasn't afraid to challenge the status quo. He loved a challenge, and he was comfortable taking risks. It turned out to be the best move the CEO ever made.

No stranger to ambiguity, Alex was flexible in formulating his strategy and sought feedback from the people around him. He made a risky move at the beginning that backfired on him. But as a result, he learned what not to do and recalibrated his approach. That was the key to success. His tendency to buck the established BFC way of doing things was exactly what was required for the company to successfully flex its approach and win in the new territory.

What Alex's success exemplifies is the importance of "learning agility": a set of qualities and attributes that allow an individual's to stay flexible, grow from mistakes, and rise to a diverse array of challenges. It's easy to assume that those qualities would be highly prized in any business environment. Flexibility, adaptability and resilience are qualities of leadership that any organization ought to value.

But in practice, this is not the case. As a rule, organizations have favored other qualities and attributes – in particular, those that are easy to measure, and those that allow an employee's development to be tracked in the form of steady, linear progress through a set of well-defined roles and business structures.

Learning agility, by contrast, has until recently been hard to measure and hard to define. It depends on related qualities such as emotional intelligence that are only just beginning to really be valued. It also relates to behaviors – such as the ability to recover from and capitalize on failure – that some managers would prefer not to think about.

The Pillars of Learning Agility

According to the researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Center for Creative Leadership, learning agility is defined as follows:

Learning agility is a mind-set and corresponding collection of practices that allow leaders to continually develop, grow and utilize new strategies that will equip them for the increasingly complex problems they face in their organizations.

Learning-agile individuals are "continually able to jettison skills, perspectives and ideas that are no longer relevant, and learn new ones that are," the researchers say.

The research identified four behaviors that enable learning agility and one that derails it.

The learning-agility "enablers" are:

- **Innovating:** This involves questioning the status quo and challenging long-held assumptions with the goal of discovering new and unique ways of doing things. Innovating requires new experiences, which provide perspective and a bigger knowledge base. Learning-agile individuals generate new ideas through their ability to view issues from multiple angles.
- **Performing:** Learning from experience occurs most often when overcoming an unfamiliar challenge. But in order to learn from such challenges, the individual must remain present and engaged, handle the stress brought on by ambiguity and adapt quickly in order to perform. This requires observation and listening skills, and the ability to process data quickly. Learning-agile people pick up new skills quickly and perform them better than less agile colleagues.
- **Reflecting:** Having new experiences does not guarantee that you will learn from them. Learning-agile people look for feedback and eagerly process information to better understand their own assumptions and behavior. As a result they are insightful about themselves, others and problems. In fact, in prior studies, Green Peak Partners discovered that strong self-awareness was the single highest predictor of success across C-suite roles.
- **Risking:** Learning-agile people are pioneers – they venture into unknown territory and put themselves "out there" to try new things. They take "progressive risk" – not thrill-seeking, but risk that leads to opportunity. They volunteer for jobs and roles where success is not guaranteed, where failure is a possibility. They stretch themselves outside their comfort zones in a continuous cycle of learning and confidence-building that ultimately leads to success.

The Link Between Emotional Intelligence and Learning Agility

How does emotional intelligence connect to learning agility? In their groundbreaking 1990 article, researchers Peter Salovey and John D. Meyer defined it as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." Learning agility is central to the first part of the task – the ability to monitor and manage one's own emotions. And since that leads naturally to an increased ability to listen, it is reasonable to suggest that learning-agile people might be more skillful at monitoring and responding to others' emotions as well. The link between learning agility and sensitivity to others' emotions has not yet been fully documented – but making the connection might prove to be a fruitful area for further research.

The learning-agility “derailer” is:

- **Defending:** Being open to experience is fundamental to learning. Individuals who remain closed or defensive when challenged or given critical feedback tend to be low in learning agility. By contrast, high learning-agile individuals seek feedback, process it and adapt based on their newfound understanding of themselves, situations and problems.

How do these five facets translate into behavior, performance and results at work? The researchers found that learning-agile individuals are notably:

- **More extroverted:** They are more sociable, more active and more likely to take charge.
- **More focused:** They continually refine and polish their thinking and their work. They are more organized, more driven and more methodical.
- **More original:** They are more likely to create new plans and ideas, seek complexity and readily accept change and innovation.
- **More resilient:** They are more “at ease,” calm and optimistic. They rebound more quickly from stressful events.
- **Less accommodating:** They are more likely to challenge others, welcome engagement, and express their opinions.

The research also shows that while many individuals can model some aspects of these behaviors, learning-agile individuals stand out in particular for their resilience, calm, and ability to remain at ease. It’s not just that they are willing to put themselves into challenging situations; it’s that they’re able to cope with the stress of these challenges and thus manage them more effectively.

The “derailer” – defensiveness – also has an impact on performance, of leaders in particular. When the researchers reviewed 360-degree evaluations, they found that leaders who ranked high on the “defending” scale were considered less effective. By contrast, peers and direct reports rated more highly the leaders who ranked high on the “reflecting” scale.

Researchers at Columbia University and the Center for Creative Leadership collaborated to develop an objective test for learning agility, called the Learning Agility Assessment Inventory (LAAI). It’s a 42-item survey that measures learning-agile behavior by asking individuals about how they respond to challenging situations, then scoring the answers against the four enablers – innovating, performing, reflecting and risking – and reverse-scoring the derailer, defending. In developing the test, researchers compared the scores to a 360-degree assessment and to another established personality test, the Workplace Big Five Profile.

We then administered this test to over 100 executives – mostly private-equity backed C-suite leaders – that we had previously assessed in a rigorous half-day structured interview. In a 2010 study with Cornell University, we showed that our assessment grades predict performance, as measured not only by revenue and EBITDA but also by boss ratings (often issued by the Board). The more recent study extended that research by showing that those who out-performed in our assessments also scored higher on the LAAI.

Taken together, the two studies demonstrate that high learning-agile individuals are also high performers.

Cultivating Your Own Learning Agility – and Coaching It in Others

One of the best ways to coach for learning agility – or for that matter, any desirable set of behaviors – is to recognize and develop it in yourself. Becoming more learning-agile will help you cope with the turbulence of the workplace. And it will make you more aware of how to bring out the potential in your learning-agile people.

Among the ways to cultivate learning agility in yourself are:

- **Innovating.** Seek out new solutions. Repeatedly ask yourself, “What else?” “What are 10 more ways I could approach this?” “What are several radical things I could try here?” It doesn’t mean you do all of these things, but you explore them before proceeding.
- **Performing.** Seek to identify patterns in complex situations. Find the similarities between current and past projects. Cultivate calm through meditation and other techniques. Enhance your listening skills – listen instead of simply (and immediately) reacting.
- **Reflecting.** Engage in “counterfactual thinking” – explore “what-ifs” and alternative histories for projects you’ve been involved in. Regularly seek out real input. Ask, “What are three or four things I or we could have done better here?” Frame the question in specific terms, instead of simply asking, “Do you think I should have done anything differently?” But make sure the questions are still open-ended – that will encourage colleagues to speak up.
- **Risking.** Look for “stretch assignments,” where the probability of success isn’t a given.
- **Avoid defending.** Acknowledge your failures (perhaps from those stretch assignments) and capture the lessons you’ve learned from them.

Reaping the benefits of learning agility takes effort and commitment. That said, the first step is simple: Recognize its attributes and that it is an asset that you need to cultivate. After that comes the hard work – creating accurate screening methods, putting the systems in place to identify learning-agile individuals and creating career paths and management techniques to get the most out of them.

But once you have started that process, you will begin to realize the benefit – an organization that is more flexible, more adaptable, better able to respond to business volatility and therefore more competitive in the face of unprecedented challenges. The results might even be revolutionary.

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