A Hot Topics Paper
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Learning Agility

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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 agility[1]. Learning agility refers to a person's desire and ability to learn from experience, and to then apply their learning to other situations[2]. 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 Eichinger[3] 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
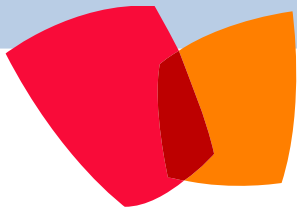
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roles, research seemed to suggest that less than a third of "high potential" individuals actually succeeded in more broad-based, senior-level positions. Additionally, although general intelligence predicts employee success for their first job, it does 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 agility[2]. 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. Rego[5] describes four ways we can learn, which can improve an individual's learning agility:
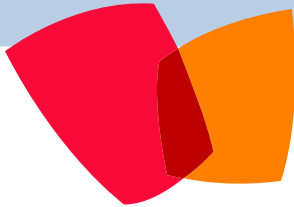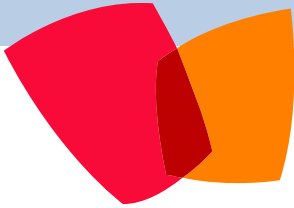
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1) through **codified knowledge**, including books, classes, and training, which can be useful for learning straightforward information—where there is one answer to a question;

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 development[4]. 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 response[4]. 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.
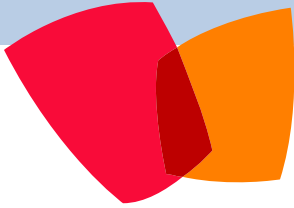
Conclusions

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.

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