



Want More Effective Managers? Learning Agility May Be the Key

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Abstract

Although it is believed that a manager's success is best predicted by previous performance, recent research illustrates that learning agility may be a better predictor of manager success. This white paper provides an overview of learning agility, including its characteristics, history, implications, and the next steps for using learning agility in to identify people who are more likely to be successful in manager roles.

Introduction

One of the best predictors for success in a management position may not be previous management performance, as traditionally expected, but rather one's level of learning agility (Conner, 2011). Learning agility refers to a person's desire and ability to learn from experience and to then apply their learning to other situations (De Meuse, Dai, & Hallenbeck, 2010). Early research on learning agility reported that 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 (2000), are most likely to succeed in upper-level management positions (De Meuse et al., 2010). 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 new ideas and learn from their mistakes in order to develop the most effective way to solve a problem. More recently, learning agility has been defined as the "ability to come up to speed quickly in one's understanding of a situation and move across ideas flexibly in service of learning both within and across experiences" (DeRue, Ashford, & Myers, 2012, p. 262-263).

People high in learning agility tend to take 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.

Background

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 (Conner, 2011; De Meuse et al., 2010; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000).

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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. Although high-performing individuals were expected to perform well in new leadership roles, research seemed to suggest that less than a third of “high potential” individuals actually succeeded in more broad-based, senior-level positions. In addition, although general intelligence predicts employee success for their first job, it does *not* predict employee success once they are promoted to a higher management position (Conner, 2011; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). What *does* have an impact on a manager’s performance once promoted is their ability to quickly and adaptably navigate the requirements of their new positions, or learning agility (DeRue et al., 2012). 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. Major popular business media outlets, including *Harvard Business Review* and *The Huffington Post*, have promoted learning agility as an important characteristic for employees and leaders of the future (e.g., “The Most In-Demand 21st Century Business Skill: Learning Agility,” *Huffington Post*).

Implications for Practice

Both practice and research on learning agility suggests several useful applications for the business world. First, race and gender are not related to a person's learning agility (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). 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 because 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 (DeRue et al., 2012). 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.

Although 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, and willingness to change and move away from habits and routines, as well as possess a strong need for growth, are likely to exhibit high levels of learning agility (De Meuse et al., 2010). However, these traits could be developed in employees who may not have such skills, which could enhance their learning agility. Rego (2011) describes four ways that employees can learn to think quickly and flexibly in new situations, including:

- (a) through **codified knowledge**, including books, classes, and training, which is particularly effective when learning straightforward information where there is one answer to a question;

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- (b) through **peer learning**, such as from interactions with mentors, coaches, and others with experience, which can challenge existing perspectives and encourage people to analyze from different viewpoints;
- (c) 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; and
- (d) by **reflection** on past experiences, which can include various relaxation activities to draw insights from previous experiences.

“Organizations are easily able to help their employees develop learning agility by offering opportunities to reflect and receive feedback.”

Every opportunity for learning gives employees a chance to strengthen their knowledge and improve their ability to transfer it 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 (Mueller-Hanson, White, Dorsey, & Pulakos, 2005). Giving employees clear opportunities to engage in each of these types of learning, and understand the effects of their

actions on relevant outcomes, 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 to develop learning agility is to offer many different training experiences that require multiple, adaptive responses as early as possible when employees begin new roles. This allows employees to begin thinking outside the box immediately, and they are less likely to become comfortable with only one method of response (Mueller-Hanson et al., 2005). Most importantly, the company must provide a workplace environment that promotes and encourages learning agility in its employees. If the organization does not, it is highly unlikely that their employees will exhibit these traits.

Next Steps

Recent theoretical research and professional white papers have indicated that learning agility is an important consideration for professionals, especially as it relates to the development of high potentials and leaders. Many business journals suggest that 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. Although definitions of “learning agility” and the way in which we measure it do not always align (DeRue et al., 2012), understanding the value of learning agility in decisions related to identifying high potentials, selection, and promotion will result in stronger organizations.

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. However, we, as a community, need to reach a consensus on the definition of learning agility and build stronger measures of it. In the meantime, many organizations offer tips and tricks for training and assessing learning agility, some of which can be accessed through the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) website.

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