WHAT EXACTLY IS

"LEARNING AGILITY"?

Learning agility has gained substantial recognition in the field of talent management as a critical factor for long-term leadership success and adaptability. Defined as the ability and motivation to learn from experiences and apply that learning in new, complex situations, it has become a benchmark for effective leadership in today's fast-evolving work environments. Highly agile learners actively seek new challenges, solicit feedback for growth, and reflect deeply on their experiences.

An agile learner is an individual having both a very high level of fluid intelligence (ability) and behavioural preferences that support an agile learning mindset (intent). A job demands high potential learners if it involves performing work that requires very strong interpersonal, cognitive, analytical, problem-solving, logical thinking and decision-making skills. High potential learners are required when the nature of work is very complicated, novel, or has high stakes attached to it.

In essence, learning agility is a meta-concept reflecting the constellation of an individual's cognitive ability and behavioural predisposition. This concept is all about the capability that defines the speed of the person to grasp something totally new. People who have strong base of learning ability are more likely to analyse, study and come up with solutions for the new situations and business problems. They tend to have the drive to come up with techniques and the passion to learn at a faster pace over others. These are the people who are never afraid of facing a problem. Rather they are more likely to face different scenarios and resolve them quickly and effectively.

It has long been recognised that a major difference between successful people and those whose careers falter is their ability to make meaning from their experiences. Leaders who refuse to let go of entrenched patterns of behaviour, or who do not recognise the nuances in different situations, tend to derail, whereas successful leaders continue to develop in their role. We now know that these successful leaders are agile learners; that is, they show the willingness and ability to learn throughout their careers, if not their entire lives.

Being open to experience is fundamental to learning. It is no surprise, that individuals who remain closed or defensive when challenged or given critical feedback tend to be lower in learning agility. These are known as de-railing factors. High learning-agile individuals seek feedback, process it, and adapt themselves based on their newfound understanding of themselves, situations, and problems. Highly successful people tend to gain confidence from their successes, but they also risk closing down to outside feedback as a result. To guard against this inadvertent destructive behaviour, defensiveness needs to be measured and understood alongside the positive behaviours associated with learning agility.

Each of these facets provides insight into the type of behaviours and actions that individuals high in learning agility employ. Learning-agile individuals seek opportunities for growth and can 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." Moreover, they can remain present in challenging situations, performing, and adapting as they go.

Finally, learning-agile individuals understand that experience alone does not guarantee learning; they take time to reflect, seeking to understand why things happen, in addition to what happened. It is important to acknowledge that although each of these facets is important, it is not likely (or perhaps even desirable) that a person can exhibit all of them simultaneously. However, individuals must possess each of these components in their repertoire to be considered learning agile.

Why is 'learning agility' important?

Today's complex and competitive business environment has generated many changes in standard operating procedures including more flexible and agile responses to change itself. The current business world is described volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – known by the acronym (VUCA) – a world in which the present is not a good predictor of the future, but is, in fact, frequently a misleading one. Instead, we need to be able to learn, unlearn and relearn. We need to develop a learning agility, a complex set of skills and competencies that allow us to learn something in one situation and apply it in a different one. VUCA is part of the new reality, and we are all going to have to live with it.
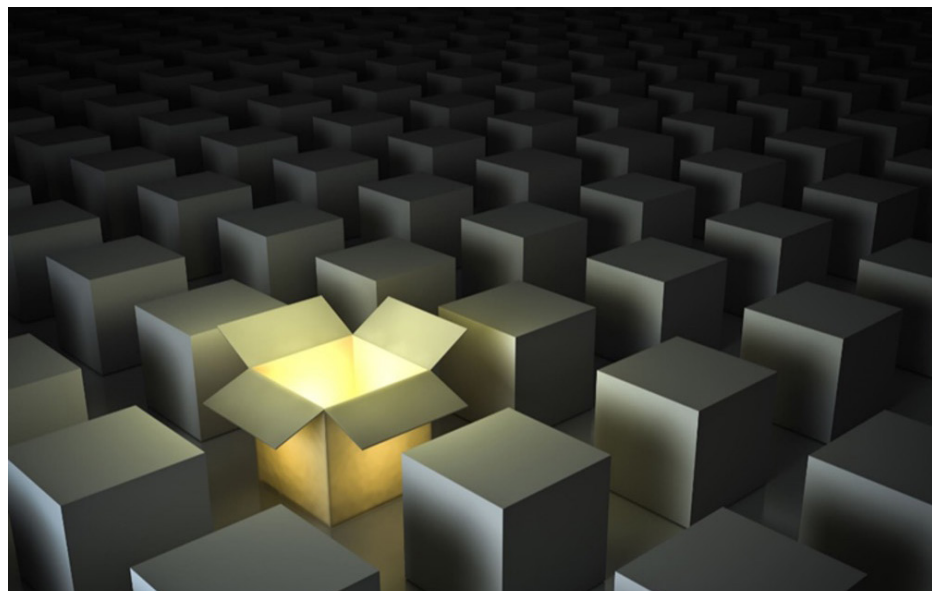
Learning agility requires from the learner the 'potential to learn' and thus an open and receptive mind-set; also a 'motivation to learn,' a willingness to participate in the learning process; and, finally, an 'adaptability to learn,' through reflection on the relevance of the acquired skills and competencies and the need to adjust them and even develop new ones. The rate at which technology is continuing to develop is almost mind boggling and with that comes uncertainty, especially in the workplace. What will our roles look like in the next 5 years? Will they still exist, or will we need to adjust our career plans drastically?

In the current business climate, business leaders need to be more mentally agile than ever. Adapting to new business strategies, working across cultures, dealing with temporary virtual teams, and taking on new assignments all demand that leaders be flexible in their responses. Given that present day organisations are becoming more complex and dynamic due to increasingly unstable and rapidly changing nature of business, learning agility is now one of the most sought-after competencies in new hires, as well as in existing employees.

People who have high levels of learning agility seek out and learn from unfamiliar experiences and then apply those lessons to succeed in the next new situation. Learning agility helps them know what to do when they do not know what to do. Learning agility is not so much about what someone has accomplished. It is about what they have the potential to accomplish, especially when faced with new challenges.

Learning agility is not correlated with age, gender, education, or other demographics – yet it is believed that only 15% of the population is naturally learning agile. However, there is evidence that learning agility increases with experience and career trajectory. People with low learning agility tend to focus on the destination whereas people with high learning agility focus on the journey.

Only a minority of companies are using learning agility to assess the leadership potential of internal and external candidates. However, organisations that see their leaders as key drivers of growth and success are increasingly adopting learning agility to differentiate talent, and it is expected that this rise will continue as businesses increasingly understand the value of being led by agile learners.

John Sullivan, an internationally renowned Silicon Valley HR guru, says that learning agility has become the ultimate distinguishing characteristic for the rapidly evolving business world. Google's former Senior Vice President of People Operations, Laszlo Bock is of the same mind. He said that at Google they view learning agility as "the leading predictor of success in the future".

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Measuring 'learning agility'

There are several commercial 'learning agility' measurement instruments available in the marketplace. Although they each have some differences, there appears to be consensus when it comes to many of the factors used to measure it. A study of learning agility by the Columbia University's Teachers College, people who are learning agile usually exhibit the following six characteristics:

1. **Remaining calm in the face of difficulty.**

2. **Taking time to reflect on own experiences.**

3. **Deliberately put oneself in challenging situations.**

4. **Being open to learning.**

5. **Resisting the temptation to become defensive in the face of adversity.**

Learning agility is enhanced by three types of behaviours:

Seeking – looking for new learning opportunities and ways of doing things, particularly in areas where success is uncertain

Performing – being able to manage oneself in challenging situations and dealing with new situations in a way that maximizes performance

Reflecting – thinking about experiences to surface critical information.

However, there are also potential behavioural derailers that may have a limiting impact on an individual's ability to do the above:

Risk Aversion, which prevents an individual from seeking out new opportunities that may guarantee success but will ultimately inhibit learning; and

Defensiveness, which prevents an individual's ability to manage effectively new situations or biases the way one thinks about past experiences.

For learning agility to be effective, conditions should exist within the organisational culture that will foster (enhance, not derail) such learning. In other words, the individual behaviours described in the preceding paragraph must also be manifested in the organisation's culture.

From the *PRISM* perspective, there are 4 core 'learning agility abilities':

Change Agility. This factor seeks out new and novel situations. They introduce new perspectives and can take the heat of change in organizations. If this agility is overused, those individuals who are highly change agile can be disruptive, always tinkering and trying to change things that are not broken. Change agile individuals take failure in stride. They relish the opportunity to think outside the box.

People Agility. This factor has a component of emotional intelligence but is also different. Individuals with high people agility are looked to by others in a crisis, enjoy helping others solve problems and are open to a wide array of individual perspectives. They value diversity of thought, rather than find it threatening. They can work through conflict successfully and without a lot of fuss or noise They are eager to gain in-depth knowledge of others and can easily adapt to different surroundings or cultures.

Results Agility. This factor focuses on the individual's ability to achieve goals in difficult circumstances. While there are many individuals who consistently deliver strong results in similar situations to those they have faced before, what differentiates the learning agile individual is the ability to repeatedly deliver top results when under pressure in new or unusual situations. People with high results agility are generally focused on and driven by a strong desire for personal achievement.

Mental Agility. This factor is different from just being smart or intelligent, it is more akin to being street wise or shrewd. It deals with the ability of individuals to handle complex tasks effectively by using effective decision-making, strategic thinking skills and attention to detail. Thinking agile individuals are curious, always looking for parallels and fresh connections. They are sponges in terms of trying to learn new information from a wide variety of sources.

Increasing agility across the above dimensions can help individuals to unlock enduring potential to achieve and succeed in uncertain situations; equipping them with the tools and solutions to draw on when faced with new challenges.

However, to achieve true learning agility, everyone must possess a realistic view of his or her strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement. This is known as Self Awareness - a key Emotional Intelligence factor. People with a high level of self-awareness are drawn to self-improvement and are eager to deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them. A high level of self-awareness can work as leverage for the other aspects of learning agility. Conversely, a low level might have the opposite effect.

Having a realistic view of your true strengths and areas for improvement is important, but that amounts to little unless you also possess strong self-management skills. Self-management refers to a combination of behaviours that focus on how people manage themselves. That involves cultivating the motivation and capability to learn new things on your own in support of your work.

Individuals who are learning-agile seek feedback, process it, and adapt their behaviour on their improved understanding of themselves, situations, and problems. It is also important to bear in mind that highly successful individuals tend to gain confidence from their successes, but they also run the risk of closing not seeking outside feedback as a result. To guard against this inadvertent limiting behaviour, it is important not to avoid learning opportunities and feedback opportunities when they arise.

Learning agility is "the magic multiplier" of potential because it does not predict high potential by itself. In other words, a person's potential is based on their natural strengths such as IQ and EQ etc., added to their personal learning experiences and multiplied by learning agility.

Schooling obviously is the most important venue for learning, especially in the learner's early years. Through schooling, learners acquire relevant, for the time being, attitudes, skills and competencies that potentially become obsolete as the VUCA environment rapidly evolves and changes. Schooling, on the other hand, ought to help learners to develop learning agility so they manage to adapt effectively in the VUCA environment. Thus, learning should be continuous, through lifelong learning (and thus the development of a "learning attitude"), as a systematic and organized venue through which learners develop and maintain learning agility.

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If you would like to know more about **Learning Agility,** *please contact us at:*

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