



MEASURING LEARNING AGILITY

TO PREDICT JOB PERFORMANCE AND
LEADERSHIP SUCCESS



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INTRODUCTION

Identifying, hiring, and developing successful leaders is a daunting task for many organizations, especially when attempting to implement succession planning. Change is inevitable and having a strong pipeline ready of high potentials (Hi-Pos) is essential to staying competitive. Additionally, identifying and developing leaders who are equipped to handle new challenges is key to sustainable growth and success for the organization.

Typically, to identify Hi-Pos, we focus on picking out top performers. We know that past behaviors are the best predictor of future behaviors, so it's sensible to assume that leaders who excel in current roles should perform well when promoted to a higher executive role. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. It's estimated by The Corporate Leadership Council (2005) that 71% of high performers are not Hi-Pos. Similar research findings have found that less than a third of high potential individuals succeeded in more broad-based, senior-level positions (Connor, 2011; Lombardo, Eichinger, 2000). 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 (Connor, 2011; Lombardo, Eichinger, 2000).

What does have an impact on performance once they are promoted? Studies have repeatedly shown that the ability to learn from new experiences is what differentiates successful executives from unsuccessful ones (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001; Goldsmith, 2007; McCall, 1998). Successful executives have strong and active learning patterns from key job assignments. They learn faster, not because they are more intelligent, but because they have more effective learning skills and strategies (DeMeuse, 2010). These leaders are learning agile, which has been found to be one of the best, reliable predictors of potential (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997).

WHAT IS LEARNING AGILITY?

Learning agility is one's ability to perform at a high level on tasks, situations, and problems encountered for the first time.

There are five key dimensions that are crucial to learning agile leaders (De Meuse, Dai, & Hallenbeck, 2010):

- **Mental Agility:** Describes people who think through problems from a fresh point of view and are comfortable with complexity, ambiguity, and explaining their thinking to others.
- **People Agility:** Describes people who know themselves well, learn from experience, treat others constructively, and are cool and resilient under the pressures of change.
- **Change Agility:** Describes people who are curious, have a passion for ideas, like to experiment with test cases, and engage in skill building activities.
- **Results Agility:** Describes people who get results under tough conditions, inspires others to perform beyond normal, and exhibit the sort of presence that builds confidence in others.
- **Self-Awareness:** Describes people who are reflective and know themselves well; understands their capabilities and their impact on others.

Putting this all together, what do learning agile leaders do? There are some common behaviors that high learning-agile individuals do, described by De Meuse, Dai, and Hallenbeck:

LEARNING AGILE LEADERS

- Learn the "right lessons" from experience and apply those lessons to new situations
- Seek out new challenges
- Actively seek feedback from others to grow and develop
- Self-reflect and evaluate their experiences and draw practical conclusions

More specifically, learning agile individuals are not using the same tactics over and over just because they have worked for them in the past, but they are eager to try out new ideas. They tend to take more control over their own learning by actively looking for opportunity to grow and actively looking for feedback, and engage in self-reflecting about their work experiences.

WHAT IF A LEADER DOES NOT HAVE LEARNING AGILITY?

Leaders who lack learning agility run the risk of becoming a derailed leader. Derailed leaders make it to senior leadership level, but plateau due to the lack of fit between personal characteristics and the skills and demands of the job. One of the most common characteristics of derailment is a leader's difficulty in changing or adapting. Leader derailment can have a huge impact on the organization. Not only is it a big financial burden when considering the costs of selection, recruitment, on-boarding, and training, but it can also disrupt employee morale and public perceptions of the organization.

HOW CAN YOU MEASURE LEARNING AGILITY?

We recommend using a robust assessment as part of the hiring process to measure and quantify a leader's potential compared to the skills that are needed for successful job performance. More specifically, executive and leadership assessments are useful and important tools. There are five key traits (e.g., learning agility) that great leaders have:

1. Ability to lead and influence others
2. Ability to relate to others
3. Ability to innovate
4. **Ability to think and learn quickly**
5. Ability to execute

Research by PSI investigated their Executive Assessment competencies and found that several subcomponents of learning agility, including adaptability, creative thinking, analytical thinking, etc. were predictive of High Potential status after controlling for effect of job performance.

Taking a step outside of leadership, we also see that learning agility is related to performance. A

study by PSI investigated the relationship between learning agility and job performance within a large communication technology organization and results revealed a statistically significant relationship with objective metric performance (e.g., call center metrics such as, volume of calls taken).

Competency	Overall Metric Composite
Learning Agility	.36+

Additionally, results revealed significant, positive relationships between learning agility and supervisor ratings of performance, such that those with higher scores on learning agility had higher ratings of task (i.e., performs work accurately), contextual (i.e., jumps in to help others when needed), and overall performance ratings (i.e., dependable, reliable employee). These results indicate that learning agile individuals had better performance on the job.

In addition to assessments, using interview questions can also help identify those learning agile individuals. Using structured, behavioral based interviews to ask questions about past behaviors allows for a better understanding of how an individual may respond in future situations or challenges.

Example Interview Question:

Describe a time when you found yourself facing an ambiguous problem where there was no clear-cut solution. How did you approach the problem? What factors did you consider? How did it turn out?

Using interview questions can further differentiate high potentials by investigating specifically how they've responded to new challenges and what the outcome was. Was there a positive outcome to a new challenge? Was it their technical knowledge that made them successful or were they able to think outside the box and apply what they've learned in the past? Have they even had the opportunity to encounter new situations that they've had to work through?

CAN YOU INCREASE YOUR LEARNING AGILITY?

According to the Creative Center for Leadership, while some of the behaviors may be easier for individuals due to personality, it's believed that anyone, with sufficient effortful practice, can employ those behaviors. Rego describes four ways you can learn, therefore improving learning agility:

1. Through codified knowledge, including books, classes, and training.
2. Through peer learning such as information shared from others with experience. This can challenge your existing perspectives and allow you to analyze from different viewpoints.
3. By direct experience, or trial and error which allows an individual to see a clear picture of how to do something and can see the results first-hand.
4. By reflection on past experiences, which can include relaxation activities to stop the mind with active thoughts and use the time to draw insights from previous experiences.

Again, change is unavoidable and being prepared with identifying high potentials is essential to staying competitive. Going beyond current success and digging deeper into individuals' learning agility can be the keystone for future success. Leaders will always be faced with new challenges, problems, and issues, but what separates the currently successful from the continually successful is the ability to meet these challenges, problems, and issues directly.

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