LEARNING AGILITY:
A CONSTRUCT WHOSE TIME HAS COME

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A significant consequence of today's dynamic, complex, and uncertain business environments is that leadership skills are subject to continual obsolescence and displacement. To be effective, leaders must demonstrate the flexibility and agility to adapt their behaviors as situations change. The willingness and capability to learn from experience and subsequently to apply that learning to perform successfully under new or first-time conditions becomes one of the most critical success factors for managers and executives. This article introduces and defines the concept of learning agility, reviews and discusses its theoretical and empirical background, and presents selected research findings related to the assessment of learning agility. Several areas for future research are also identified.

Keywords: learning agility, leadership effectiveness, leadership potential, succession management

> *When the winds of change rage,*
>
> *Some build shelters while others build windmills.*
>
> —*A Chinese Proverb*

The necessity for individuals to alter their leadership style has been recognized for a long time. This concept has been called various names by different researchers. For example, Fred Fiedler (1967) pioneered the idea that managers either could be task-oriented or relationship-oriented. Which leadership style was most effective depended on the "situational favorableness" of the environment. Victor Vroom and Philip Yetton (1973) contended that leaders need to be attuned to the situation and vary their decision making styles to meet the needs of the environment and their direct reports. More recently, Robert Kaplan and Rob Kaiser (2006) have argued for leadership versatility. They asserted that managers need a well-rounded repertoire to adapt to a wide variety of changing environmental conditions.

In the world of leadership, management transitions play a major role. Transitions are challenging and developmental, because individuals are in such circumstances faced with novel situations that render existing routines and leadership behaviors inadequate. Transitions require the flexibility

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to learn new ways of coping with unforeseen problems and opportunities. Individuals who cannot let go of old patterns of behavior or who do not recognize the nuances in different situations tend to fail. Successful leaders develop on the job (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; Tannenbaum, 1997). They learn leadership from day-in and day-out experiences. Unfortunately, many leaders derail. Such leaders may depend too much on what had gotten them into management in the first place and tend to stop learning what is needed to perform effectively in new circumstances. A relatively new construct, entitled *learning agility*, has increasingly being recognized as essential for long-term leadership success (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997).

The assessment of learning agility, we believe, will likely become a critical component of talent management practices in most organizations during this decade. Consequently, a conceptual understanding of learning agility, as well as the development of psychometrically sound measures of it, we believe is vital for applied consulting work. In this article, we define learning agility as a key indicator of future leadership success and review its theoretical background. Subsequently, we examine various transitions managers make during their careers and discuss the saliency of learning agility for those transitions. We then present a measure of learning agility and review some empirical findings. The article closes with a discussion of some key theoretical and conceptual issues.

Learning Agility: What is It?

The concept of learning agility was developed in the practitioner world. It can be defined as *the willingness and ability to learn from experience, and subsequently apply that learning to perform successfully under new or first-time conditions* (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). According to this view, high learning agile individuals learn the "right lessons" from experience and apply those lessons to novel situations. People who are highly learning agile continuously seek out new challenges, actively seek feedback from others to grow and develop, tend to self-reflect, and evaluate their experiences and draw practical conclusions.

Clarifying the Meaning of "Leadership Potential"

In 2000, Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger published an article entitled, "High Potentials as High Learners." It highlighted the concept of learning agility, and presented their findings on the relationship between learning agility and leadership potential. The authors theorized that potential cannot be fully detected from what an individual already demonstrates on the job. Rather, it requires the individual do something new or different. In their view, potential involves learning new skills to perform in novel, and, very often, first-time situations. They speculated that people differ in their aptitude to learn from their experiences. It is this capability and motivation to learn from experience that differentiates high potentials that go on to succeed from others (see also McCall et al., 1988). A recent review article reinforced the importance of a learning component to high potential identification (Silzer & Church, 2009). These authors stated that "whenever there is an effort to identify individuals with potential, it inherently suggests that the person does not currently have the end-state skills and needs to further develop to obtain them. The learning dimensions are the gatekeepers to learning those end-state skills. Without them little development or growth will occur, for any career path" (pp. 401–402).

The practical implication is that organizations should assess learning agility to identify individuals who have the potential required for future positions. This approach differs from most traditional practices. Previously, most companies developed and promoted their high performers, without realizing that current performance in one situation does not guarantee high performance in a different one. The Corporate Leadership Council's (2005) research on potential reported that fewer than 30% of an organization's current high performers have the potential to rise to and succeed in broader senior-level, critical positions. Thus, organizations could improve their high potential identification efforts by adding an assessment of an individual's learning agility.

The Historical Roots and Theoretical Foundation of Learning Agility

Many different researchers have contributed to the evolution of learning agility as an important predictor of high potential identification. The longitudinal studies conducted at AT&T observed that managers who had been assessed low for potential frequently were more successful than expected when they had developmental opportunities (see Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974). Sternberg and his colleagues emphasized practical intelligence as a critical component of overall intelligence (Sternberg, Wagner, Williams, & Horvath, 1995). Such characteristics as being street smart, interpersonal savvy, and possessing common sense are important in "practical intelligence." These authors found that practical intelligence was much more predictive of organizational success than basic IQ.

The specific formulation of the learning agility concept is rooted largely in two different streams of research conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). One series of studies, "The Lessons of Experience," examined what leadership learning was most important for success in organizations. The other series of studies investigated reasons why executives derail.

The lessons of experience.   By the early 1980s, researchers recognized that it was not possible to provide a comprehensive summary of predisposing characteristics of effective leadership. Leadership seemed to be strongly influenced by gaining leadership experience. However, researchers had a limited knowledge of how experience actually develops managers. The CCL addressed this gap in understanding by conducting a series of studies investigating how executives learn from their work experiences. Corporate executives were interviewed and asked to describe key events in their careers that caused the most learning. The analyses and results were summarized in the book aptly titled, *The Lessons of Experience* (McCall et al., 1988).

One of the important findings of this research is that people significantly differ in their ability to learn from experience. Learning and development requires that individuals move away from their comfort zone, their habits, and their routines. The best learning experiences are emotional, require us to take risks, and tend to have real-life consequences. The journey can be unpleasant. Learners have to be resilient and nondefensive. Individuals have to possess a strong need for growth. Overall, this research reveals that the willingness and ability to learn from experience separates high potentials from others.

Executive derailment.   A second stream of research that framed the development of learning agility was conducted at CCL more than two decades ago (Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988; McCall & Lombardo, 1983). These studies compared successful versus derailed executives. Derailed executives were defined as those individuals who were identified as high potentials, promoted, and expected to go far only to ultimately fail. This research produced consistent findings across time, hierarchical levels, national culture, sex, and organizations (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, in press).

The derailment research found that both successful and derailed executives (1) were very bright, (2) had been identified as high potentials early in their career, (3) possessed outstanding records of achievement, and (4) were ambitious and willing to sacrifice. Both groups of executives also possessed very few personal flaws. However, one derailment factor was observed repeatedly. The authors found that the derailed executives were unable or unwilling to change or adapt. They relied too much on a narrow set of work skills. Successful and derailed executives also differed in the way they managed hardship and mistakes. Those executives who were successful overwhelmingly handled failure with poise and grace. They admitted mistakes, accepted responsibility, and then acted to correct the problems. In contrast, leaders who derailed tended to be defensive about their failure, attempting to keep it under cover while they fixed it, or they tended to blame others. The popular literature reveals similar stories of failed leadership (Finkelstein, 2003). Goldsmith (2007) advised executives "what got you here won't get you there." To continue down the path of success, successful leaders need to change and adapt.

Military Research on Learning Agility

Research and application of learning agility is not limited to certain industries or types of organizations. For example, the United States military has shown a particular interest in identifying

and developing learning agile leaders. The military's mission in both conflict and peacekeeping activities has evolved considerably during recent years. Today, military personnel are required to play multiple roles, often during the course of a single day. Adaptability and quick learning are essential to navigate the situations soldiers face on the ground winning both skirmishes and hearts and minds in theaters like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Wong (2004) focused on the environmental drivers that promote the development of adaptive behaviors and identified the key elements of complexity, unpredictability, and ambiguity. Officers who responded constructively to these elements demonstrated higher levels of independence, initiative, innovation, and confidence. Gehler (2005) concluded that agile leaders need to be supported by agile institutions. Specifically, Gehler suggested that training efforts need to be accelerated, dynamic, and experience-based to support the development of agile capabilities. Mueller-Hanson, White, Dorsey, and Pulakos (2005) recommended early and frequent exposure to training experiences that call for adaptive responses. They indicated soldiers should have numerous and diverse opportunities to apply the lessons learned, receive feedback, and then apply again. Many of the findings from the military's research can be applied to the development of learning agility in other settings.

Business Imperatives for Learning Agility

Because of the ongoing changes occurring in today's organizations and markets, adaptability, agility, and flexibility have become increasingly important to management performance. In the contemporary business world, traditional selection processes are dysfunctional (Sloan, 1994). Such practices are designed primarily to predict performance in a static business environment. However, individual attributes that are associated with successful performance in this constantly changing environment tend to be different. To be effective today, leaders need to continuously learn and adapt to *changing* business requirements.

Indeed, leaders need to be learning agile for many reasons. We identify several of them in the following section. Although we describe different scenarios, there is one common element—all the scenarios involve transition. Derailment is most likely to occur when managers and executives fail to update their skills following job and career transitions (Hogan et al., in press; McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

Vertical Transitions

Scholars have realized for a long time that leader performance requirements change as one moves up the organization. For example, Jacobs and Jacques (1987) proposed Stratified Systems Theory. This theory of leadership identified three different sets of leadership skills: (1) technical, (2) interpersonal, and (3) conceptual. As an individual gets promoted up the organizational hierarchy, leadership requires increasing amounts of interpersonal and conceptual skills and a lower amount of technical skills.

Arthur Freedman (1998) contended that in complex, multitiered organizations each level is unique. As individuals move up the organizational hierarchy, they must let go of some things, preserve some things, and add other things. He articulated five pathways (from the bottom level to the top), and discussed the critical responsibilities and behaviors of which upwardly mobile managers must let go, add on, and preserve at each of the crossroads. Managers in transition must identify and acquire proficiencies in applying many new, vastly different competencies and attributes to perform their new responsibilities. Freedman (1998) also examined the psychological dynamics that prevent individuals from learning and adjusting to the demands of a new job at a higher level. For instance, he asserted that most people derive a sense of pride and confidence when they perform their work roles with competence, comfort, and certainty. Unfortunately, many people enjoy these good feelings so much that they become addicted to the associated role behaviors. This tendency inhibits their ability to venture outside their comfort zone and adapt their behavior to new challenges.

Recently, Brousseau, Driver, Hourihan, and Larsson (2006) investigated how managers' decision-making styles evolve during their managerial careers. Based upon an analysis of the decision

profiles of more than 120,000 managers and executives, Brousseau et al. found that as individuals progress from first-line supervisors to managers to directors to vice presidents to senior executives, their approach to decision making evolves along a predictable path. Kaiser, Craig, Overfield, and Yarborough (2010) arrived at a similar finding. They observed that behaviors associated with effectiveness were quite different at the bottom, middle, and top. This concept that ascending organizational levels demands different and more complex leadership skills has been popularized in the practitioner world by Charan, Drotter, and Noel (2000).

Increasing Complexity of the Management Job

There is a rich tradition in the study of leadership that recognizes the complexity of roles managers must play (Zaccaro, 2001). Mintzberg (1975) may be the most influential in the modern era in discerning the diversity of roles in managerial work. Based on an in-depth, observational study of executives, Mintzberg delineated 10 essential roles managers must perform. Each role requires a distinct set of behaviors. Consequently, managers have to be able to enact a wide variety of behavioral patterns to match the requirements of the different tasks that comprise the managerial job. This complexity involves both the diversity of activities facing managers as well as the pace with which managers must toggle between different roles.

Hooijberg, Hunt, and Dodge (1997) identified two critical components related to leadership complexity—behavioral repertoire and behavioral differentiation. *Behavioral repertoire* refers to the portfolio of leadership roles a manager can perform. A broad portfolio of leadership roles makes it more likely that a manager can perform the appropriate leadership roles for a given situation and meet the expectations of a variety of stakeholders. *Behavioral differentiation* denotes the ability of managers to perform different leadership roles they have in their behavioral repertoire depending on the organizational situation. Effective leaders are those individuals who can execute a wide range of roles and vary the performance of their leadership in situations. Given the ambiguity and volatility companies face today, one can easily understand the importance of learning agility to a manager's performance. It is essential that managers invest the time and effort to learn to manage the increasing complexity in the modern workplace.

Managing Paradox

Many of the traditional theories of leadership have divided the leadership domain into contrasting categories (for a review, see Kaiser & Overfield, 2010, this issue). Classifications such as Theory X versus Theory Y (McGregor, 1960), autocratic versus consultative (Vroom & Yetton, 1973), task-oriented versus relationship-oriented (Fiedler, 1967), transactional versus transformational (Burns, 1978), and directive versus participative (House, 1971) are some examples. Central to these theories is the notion that leaders can be classified in either one category or the other. Recently, however, scholars have argued that paradox is inherent in management (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004). Effective leaders must be able to accommodate multiple opposing categories simultaneously and possess the behavioral capacity to react to paradoxes or dilemmas in their environments.

Quinn and his colleagues formulated a competing values framework of leadership that addresses issues of contradiction and paradox in management (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995). This model contains eight leadership roles along two dimensions: (1) flexibility versus control and (2) internal focus versus external focus. The model assumes that inexperienced leaders perceive the two ends of the continuum as incompatible, indicating a low level of leader development. In contrast, the ability of leaders to reconcile these extremes characterizes a high level of leader development. Similarly, Kaplan and Kaiser (2006) described a polarized view of leadership in terms of lopsidedness. According to these authors, "Lopsided leaders resolve the tension inherent in a pair of opposing leadership virtues by opting for one side over the other" (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006, p. 68). The paradox in management requires leaders to be sufficiently agile to master opposing behaviors. Leaders who can learn to manage contradictory roles will be more effective than so-called lopsided leaders (Kaiser, Lindberg, & Craig, 2007; Kaiser & Overfield, 2010, this issue).

Global Leadership

In today's business world, there is an unprecedented requirement for leaders who can manage companies globally. The term "global" encompasses much more than simply geographic reach in terms of business operations. It also includes the notion of cultural reach in terms of people, as well as intellectual reach in terms of strategic complexity (Osland, Bird, Mendenhall, & Osland, 2006). Successful leaders possess a global mindset. A global mindset denotes the ability to scan the world from a broad perspective, looking for unexpected trends that may constitute a threat or an opportunity. In the global context, scholars have emphasized an ability to develop and interpret criteria for personal and business performance that are independent from the assumptions of a single country, culture, or context.

McCall and Hollenbeck (2002) investigated derailment among a group of global executives working in foreign cultures. They observed that many of the global executives failed for seemingly contradictory reasons. For example, some executives were perceived as too autocratic while others delegated too much. Some executives were viewed as too detail-oriented and tactical while others too visionary and strategic. Some executives failed because they were too brash, while others failed because they were too unassuming. In addition, the authors found that strength in one culture could become a fatal flaw in another culture (e.g., confidence was perceived as arrogance, decisiveness was perceived as not listening). The authors concluded that global transitions require "sometimes letting go, sometimes adding to, sometimes both, but rarely staying the course" (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 6). The findings clearly indicate that global leadership mandates that leaders must learn and adapt to the local customs and cultures.

Overall, we see an emerging consensus among scholars regarding what defines effective leadership. Successful leaders are agile, versatile, flexible, and adaptive. They demonstrate nimble behaviors when responding to the complex, paradoxical, and ever changing situations that confront today's leaders (Zaccaro, 2001). The ability of a leader to match his or her behavioral repertoire to the demands of the situation becomes a distinctive leadership competence. This distinctive competence is largely the result of one's job-related and life experiences—understanding what will work in what specific situations. The willingness and capability to learn from experience is vital for the development of flexible, adaptive leadership behaviors.

Measuring Learning Agility

As previously stated, learning agility is one of the defining components of potential (Silzer & Church, 2009). Many practitioners have developed or are starting to develop assessments of learning agility (e.g., Barnett, 2008; Spreitzer et al., 1997). Among the 11 different practitioner models of high potential reviewed by Silzer and Church (2009), eight included some kind of measure of learning agility. In this section, we present some findings from our experience in assessing learning agility. It is based on Lombardo and Eichinger's (2000; Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004) model of learning agility. Their instrument, entitled the Choices Architect, uses a multirater approach to assess the following four facets of learning agility: (1) *Mental Agility*, (2) *People Agility*, (3) *Change Agility*, and (4) *Results Agility*. Table 1 describes these four factors. Naturally, there are other assessment tools available. Different instruments may employ different methodologies and scales.

Research has found that learning agility significantly predicts supervisory ratings of promotability as well as performance *following* a promotion (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). In addition, research indicates that learning agility provides incremental validity over IQ and personality in predicting performance (cf. Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2002). A summary of other research findings is highlighted below.

- Because companies usually administer a learning agility assessment to a select group of high performing employees, a negatively skewed distribution typically is observed. However, learning agility has a normal distribution in the general employee population (De Meuse, Dai, Hallenbeck, & Tang, 2008).

Table 1

Key Characteristics of Highly Agile Learners as Measured by the Choices Architect

Areas of learning agility	Characteristics
Mental agility	Curious
	Gets to root causes
	Comfortable with ambiguity and complexity
	Finds parallels and contrasts easily
	Questions conventional wisdom
	Finds solutions to difficult problems
	Reads broadly and has wide interests
People agility	Open-minded and tolerant
	Self-aware
	Comfortable with diversity and differences of opinion
	Can play many roles simultaneously
	Understands others
	Relishes helping others succeed
	Politically agile
	Deals with conflict constructively
	Very skilled communicator
Change agility	Loves experimenting and trying new things
	Easily accepts challenges
	Accepts responsibility and accountability
	Introduces new slants on old ideas
Results agility	Builds high-performance teams
	Can achieve goals against the odds
	Has tremendous drive to accomplish tasks
	Very flexible and adaptable
	Has significant personal presence

Note. Adapted from Eichinger, Lombardo, & Capretta (2010), *FYI for learning agility* (p. 19). Copyright 2010 by Lominger International: A Korn/Ferry Company. Adapted with permission.

- In general, learning agility scores are unrelated to gender (De Meuse et al., 2008; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002). However, as expected, female managers have been found to score slightly higher than male managers on the "people agility" facet of learning agility. This finding is consistent with the literature, in that women appear to be more attuned to others, learn more from others, and have more versatile interpersonal skills on average than do men (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2009; Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990). There were no statistically significant differences between mean scores on overall learning agility for men and women.
- Learning agility generally is unrelated to age (De Meuse et al., 2008). There is some evidence that younger individuals tend to score slightly higher than older ones on the "change agility" facet (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002). However, overall learning agility mean scores were not statistically different across age groups.
- There also is no evidence suggesting significant ethnicity-related differences on learning agility (Church, 2006; De Meuse et al., 2008).
- Learning agility appears to be a relatively stable construct. Test–retest reliability coefficients (30-day interval) ranged from 0.81 to 0.90 for different facets of learning agility (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002).
- In general, people tend to score relatively higher on "results agility" and "mental agility" than on "people agility" and "change agility" (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002). The same scoring pattern was replicated in different international regions (De Meuse et al., 2008).
- Individuals generally lack awareness of the extent of their learning agility. Low learning agile individuals tend to *overrate* themselves; whereas, high learning agile individuals are

more likely to *underrate* themselves (see De Meuse et al., 2008). This pattern of self-other agreement is consistent with the findings for other multisource assessments—overraters underperform, underraters overperform (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992).

An obvious limitation with the Lombardo and Eichinger's Choices Architect approach is that it is a multirater assessment. Such a measure requires input from a variety of raters, all of which presumably have to see the targeted individual in action before providing ratings. In a hiring situation with external candidates, organizations have to employ different methodologies to measure learning agility. In this instance, a structured interview may be a good alternative. Interviewers can probe by asking questions to assess how much candidates have learned from their past experiences and how likely they can apply the learning to future situations. Another option would be to create a self assessment of learning agility. However, such a measure would be difficult to develop since research suggests that many individuals are unaware of the extent of their learning agility. One possible alternative would be to create an assessment battery that taps psychological constructs that predict learning agility, which we discuss in greater detail in the next section.

Discussion

In this article, we reviewed the theoretical foundation and traced the historical roots of learning agility. We also discussed the business imperatives for learning agility, as well as presented some empirical findings related to its assessment. It appears that Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) originally developed and operationalized this construct mainly for applied settings. Thus far, learning agility has remained relatively obscure in the academic world. Although there is a plethora of scholarly research that reinforces the notion of leadership learning (London, 2002), few published studies have directly investigated learning agility. Many conceptual, empirical, and theoretical issues remain to be explored. In the following section, we review some of the key ones.

Related Psychological Constructs

There are a few constructs in the literature that appear to be relevant to learning agility. What are the differences and similarities between these constructs? How do they compare to learning agility? Can they be used interchangeably? Addressing these questions will enhance conceptual clarity with regard to learning agility. We have identified two particular constructs—learning goal orientation and leadership agility—that merit further examination.

Learning goal orientation. Initially developed in educational and cognitive psychology (Dweck, 1986), and more recently adopted by management scholars (e.g., VandeWalle, 2001), learning goal orientation is considered an important motivational characteristic. This line of research distinguishes between people with a learning orientation, who believe that with effort they can increase their knowledge and ability, and people with a performance orientation, who believe their knowledge and ability are fixed and cannot be changed. Managers with a learning goal orientation seek to develop competence by gaining new skills and mastering tasks, while managers with a performance goal orientation avoid situations that reveal what they do not currently know.

To clarify how learning agility is different from learning goal orientation, we need to consider how people develop in the workplace. Research indicates that leaders develop primarily on the job. Research also suggests that jobs tend to be most developmental when they possess characteristics which are novel, ambiguous, emotional, diverse, and adverse (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). The concept of learning agility is intended to address the question: What are the individual traits required for an individual to benefit most from such developmental experiences? Because of the complexity of the characteristics of developmental jobs, learning agility is a multidimensional concept. Consequently, the ability to learn from challenging and difficult job experiences requires much more than simply possessing a learning goal orientation. In one study, learning agility was observed to have essentially no correlation ($r = .07$) with learning goal orientation (Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2002).

Leadership agility.   Leadership scholars refer to this construct by a variety of different names, such as leadership flexibility, leadership adaptability, and leadership versatility. The emerging consensus is that leadership effectiveness reflects, fundamentally, an ability to respond appropriately across different and dynamic organizational requirements. However, as indicated previously, for leaders to be able to adapt their behaviors to the situations, they must develop behavioral repertoire and behavioral differentiation (Hooijberg et al., 1997). Learning agility is the early indicator, while demonstrated agile behavior is the end-state of this development process. There is preliminary evidence suggesting that learning from past experience predicts adaptive leadership performance (Pulakos et al., 2002).

Based on the above discussion, there appear to be three defining characteristics of learning agility relative to other constructs. First, the construct of learning agility ties closely to developmental job experiences. Second, it is multidimensional, reflecting the complex requirement of challenging jobs. Third, it is an early indicator of leadership effectiveness. Therefore, learning agility can be most appropriately construed as a "metacompetency" (i.e., an individual attribute that is prerequisite to the development of other competencies; cf. Briscoe & Hall, 1999). These three defining characteristics make learning agility unique and different from other constructs.

Boundary Conditions

Leadership learning is an adaptive response to the changing environment. However, is high learning agility always better than low learning agility regardless of conditions? There is evidence that high levels of learning agility may *not* lead to effectiveness in some situations. For example, one study found that in the early phase of organizational socialization, internally promoted executives with high learning tendencies received lower multisource performance ratings and satisfaction ratings from direct reports than those executives with low learning tendencies (Adis, Herman, Zaccaro, Murensky, & Leslie, 2008). Perhaps, the employees expected that internal promotees already should be knowledgeable about the organization and perceived learning behaviors in this context as a reflection of naiveté or insufficient ability.

There are also situations when employees expect firmness, decisiveness, and consistency from leaders. Jobs requiring strict adherence to safety protocols such as nuclear power plant operators and police officers are two examples. Indeed, Bedeian and Day (2004) debated whether chameleon-like leaders can lead successfully. London (2002) recommended that leaders need to act diplomatically but maintain principles during tough times. Future research should examine what are the situations when too much learning agility might be construed as unnecessary or counterproductive.

Antecedents and Moderators

Another issue for exploration is why some individuals are more learning agile than others. Understanding such reasons will improve the assessment of learning agility. Further, it should help us predict how much learning agility can be developed in an individual and what are the most efficient ways for its development. We distinguish between two types of variables—individual antecedents and environmental moderators.

Individual antecedents.   In this category, we identify three individual differences. The first one is past experience. It seems reasonable to expect that individuals who have lived in a number of diverse locations and worked in a variety of job settings would be more likely open-minded and possess a propensity to learn than individuals who remain in stable, routine environments (De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt, & Klehe, 2009). A second factor is self awareness. Self awareness refers to the ability to have personal insight and form accurate self-perceptions. Leadership learning without self awareness translates into mindless reaction to the environment, with no self-direction (Briscoe & Hall, 1999).

The third antecedent variable is an individual's ability to handle complexity. According to Day and Lance (2004), leadership development essentially is the development of leadership complexity. Complex leadership roles require a corresponding complexity of thinking, observing, and action. Recently, Silzer and Church (2009) identified mental capability and personality as foundational

components of leadership potential. Hooijberg et al. (1997) likewise proposed cognitive and social complexity as important in leadership. These two types of complexity are reflected in Lombardo and Eichinger's (2000) assessment of learning agility, namely the two components of mental agility and people agility, respectively.

Environmental moderators.   There appear to be two critical environmental factors related to learning agility. The first one is organizational culture. Learning from experience requires one to be wrong (at least) part of the time. A punitive culture inhibits individuals' motivation for learning (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). In contrast, a culture that is supportive, entrepreneurial, and nurturing fosters learning and learning agility. A second environment factor is self-fulfilling prophecy. Dominick and Gabriel (2009) pointed out that people have the ability to influence an individual's potential through merely labeling that person as having potential. The perceptions and evaluations of others can instill confidence, heighten self-worth, and impact self-attributions which, in turn, can enhance one's learning agility. These findings suggest how managers can promote learning agility among their employees.

Conclusion

The need for identifying and developing high potential employees has become increasingly important in organizations. Practitioners have become intimately attuned to the development of the next generation of organizational leaders. The measure of an individual's learning agility can be a critical component in this process. Too often, the identification and development of high potentials is based on overall, generic observations or visceral reactions. One key advantage of using learning agility is that it enables an independent, quantifiable assessment of an individual's potential. It provides an organization's leaders with an objective index of the likelihood of success if promoted.

Although the research indicates that a psychometric assessment of learning agility can aid organizations, many theoretical questions remain to be explored. A primary need pertains to the conceptual clarification of the construct itself. How is it related to other constructs? What are the individual antecedents and environment moderators? What are the situations where learning agility is the most beneficial to leadership effectiveness? To what extent can we develop it? Learning agility is a promising research topic. Companies need leaders who thrive on new challenges and experiences, leaders who endorse a mentality captured in the following statement by the country music singer, Jimmy Dean, who asserted, "I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to reach my destination." In short, organizations need leaders who are learning agile.

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