

LEARNING AGILITY

Competency Development Guide

Learning Agility Defined:

The willingness and ability to learn from experience and the ability to apply what you've learned for effective performance in new or unfamiliar conditions. Why is Learning Agility Important?

// The hallmark of someone with learning agility is that they learn lessons from diverse experiences and are able to distill those down to rules of thumb so that, when they're put in an unfamiliar situation, they aren't stumped by it. It's almost become a price of entry for success now, especially in leadership and executive roles. **//**

Victoria Swisher, author of *Becoming an Agile Leader*, quoted in *The Importance of Agility*, Human Resources Executive, January/February 2013, p. 16.

Agility is important at two levels – organizational and for employees, especially leaders. Agile organizations gain competitive advantages.

According to data published in *Forbes* in Mid-2013, agile organizations were:

- 49% more likely to have entered a new market
- 24% more likely to have significantly reduced business complexity
- 47% more likely to have somewhat reduced complexity
- 61% more likely to increase employee productivity

... and that's just scratching the surface. As the pace of change and the complexity of markets increase, agility as a business competency will become more important, not less.

Agile organizations will need leaders who are agile learners. In a marketplace where ambiguity and complexity are the norm, the ability to function at high levels in new and unfamiliar situations will be the ultimate differentiator between high performing leaders and average performing leaders.

Supporting Behaviors

In the book, *Becoming an Agile Leader*, Victoria Swisher starts with an interesting anecdote about the difference between a traditional view of intelligence as indicators of future success and actual results. A major employer of accountants added about 400 well-qualified, bright accountants each year using the traditional measures of GPA, test scores and academic awards as qualifiers. Unfortunately, the employer saw a 50% attrition rate in these new hires. So, the recruiters changed up the interviewing and started asking questions gauging curiosity and interest in learning new things, which are agile learning traits. The employer experienced a significant improvement in the 2-year attrition rate using the revised recruiting method.

7 DISTINCT PROFILES OF LEARNING AGILITY

Problem Solvers

Thought Leaders

Trailblazers

Champions

Pillars

Diplomats

Energizers

"People who are learning agile: Seek out experiences to learn from; enjoy complex problems and challenges associated with new experiences because they have an interest in making sense of them; perform better because they incorporate new skills into their repertoire. A person who is learning agile has more lessons, more tools, and more solutions to draw on when faced with new business challenges."

Hallenbeck, Swisher, and Orr, July 2011

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Supporting Behaviors Continued

Caveat – we do not need an organization of 100% agile learners! One of the most important characteristics of agile learners is an innate sense of restlessness and curiosity. These are people who love to learn new things, but who may get bored with developing deep mastery of any one specific discipline. Organizations NEED people with deep levels of mastery in many crucial job functions and roles. Some examples include engineering, architecture, medicine, the law, compliance, etc. However, nearly every leader, no matter the subject matter or field, will benefit from improvement in learning agility, because improvement in the ability to apply experience to new and unfamiliar situations will help any leader perform at a higher level as even the most conservative professions now face enormous pressures to change and adapt in this market.

Here are five important behaviors or characteristics common to agile learners:

- Self-Awareness
- Mental Agility
- People Agility
- Adaptability
- Results Oriented

Self-Awareness: This is a critical foundational trait, characteristic and set of behaviors common among people who are agile learners. It's entirely logical, too. People who understand their own strengths and weaknesses, seek feedback and understand that criticism can be helpful are people who are usually driven by a desire to improve themselves. When we are blind to the truth about our own ability, it's nearly impossible to learn new things.

Mental Agility: This is the ability of a person to embrace and be comfortable with complexity and ambiguity - to look at situations and problems in unique and non-linear ways. The world in which we live and the modern market place are not ideally suited for traditional problem solving skills. Traditionally, we taught professionals to move in a logical progression from identification of the problem to using known data points to developing a logical resolution. It was "inputs to outputs." In today's market, this traditional approach to problems isn't always going to be effective, because organizations are frequently confronted with dilemmas – not problems. Dealing with dilemmas requires us to embrace complexity and ambiguity and looking at situations from a wide variety of perspectives.

People Agility: This is a set of behaviors that revolve around being open-minded and enjoying interacting with a diversity of people. In this context diversity should be thought of beyond cultural or racial diversity to include diversity of ideas, thoughts and perspectives.

Adaptability: This is the extent to which people are comfortable with change and new ways of doing things.

Results Oriented: This is a set of behaviors and motivations that define people who thrive in challenging situations, and through resourcefulness and perseverance, deliver results.

SUPPORTING BEHAVIOR STATEMENT

To identify competency skill gaps consider outlining key supporting behaviors that are important in your organization.

You can assign a basic Likert scale to each behavior statement (examples outlined below) and have the employee and the employee's manager rate proficiency.

SELF-AWARENESS:

Identifies personal skill areas to be developed. Looks for opportunities to learn from mistakes. Invests times and resources to learn, grow and develop.

MENTAL AGILITY:

Is open to new ideas, perspectives, structures, strategies or positions. Operates well in situations when the consequences of decisions and actions are unclear.

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Development Activity and Suggestions





Assessments. Take assessments and think carefully about the results! Not every assessment will yield perfect results, and sometimes that's just as enlightening as assessments that are spot on. As you think about the hits and misses of an assessment, just be honest with yourself about WHY the results are accurate or inaccurate. Some assessment examples to help get you started include: DISC, Myers-Briggs, Caliper, Ntrinsx, and there are many more.

Seek informal feedback. Do you have a coach or a mentor? If so, these people are invaluable resources for the type of candid feedback we all need from time-to-time to keep our careers on track and to help keep us grounded in a realistic appraisal of our current strengths, weaknesses and development needs.

Find time for reflection. This may sound a little like some "new age" advice, but it's very important to step back and take time to simply think and reflect on our lives, careers, values and priorities. Keep a career journal or update your resume. Think about accomplishments. Is your career aligned with your current values and life goals? Did you accomplish something in the last year that provided a sense of pride and self-worth?

Exercise. Yes. Exercise. Staying fit helps keep our minds sharp and reinvigorates our spirits. There is some great research out there that proves a correlation between exercise, productivity and mental health.

Recommended Resources from the BizLibrary Collection

-  Flexible Thinking at Work
-  Four Ways to Boost Your Leadership Skills
-  Using Emotional Intelligence: Improving Your Self Awareness
-  Learning What You Don't Know

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SUPPORTING BEHAVIOR STATEMENT

PEOPLE AGILITY:

Builds cooperation between departments and work groups.
Develops rapport with a variety of people.
Deals effectively with all races, nationalities, cultures, disabilities, ages, sexes, and life perspectives.

ADAPTABILITY:

Accurately accesses the potential barriers and resources for change initiatives.
Envisions and articulates the intended result of the change process.
Promptly switches strategies or tactics if the current ones are not working.

RESULTS ORIENTED:

Seeks and gives performance feedback to others.
Pays attention to quality and quantity of performance.