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Learning Agility

The DNA for Leaders and Organizations in the Twenty-First Century

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In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.

—Eric Hoffer (1898–1983), American philosopher and author

Standard Oil, General Foods, Arthur Andersen, Enron, Northwest Airlines, TWA, Pan Am, Compaq, MCI WorldCom, Woolworth's, Blockbuster, Tower Records, Borders, Paine Webber, Pets.com, Pullman Company, and the list goes on and on. Once mighty companies that dominated our landscape no longer exist today. Whether their demise was due to corporate scandal, changing technology, a merger or acquisition, financial mismanagement, or simply the survival of the fittest, these companies are gone. Clearly, “people don't listen” anymore when E.F. Hutton speaks since it is no longer talking. It will be interesting to discover if the corporate behemoths of today, such as Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Wal-Mart will survive during the next 50 years. Perhaps, the key lesson history has taught us is times change, and that size and dominance do not guarantee longevity. If so, dinosaurs still would be roaming Earth.

Companies—as well as animals and humans—need to adapt to prosper, which translates into leaders of those companies needing to learn, develop, and evolve. Leaders must become strategically focused, flexible, environmentally mindful, reflective, and responsive to feedback. The construct of “learning agility” is at the core of those behaviors. After all, companies are social systems at their essence (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Organizations are

composed of and led by people. If its leaders are not agile, other employees won't be agile, and the organization won't be able to adapt, thrive, or survive!

Practitioners and academicians alike agree that the proper identification and development of leaders is vital to the future success of any organization. Numerous articles and books have been written on the topic of leadership. A recent Google search of the word *leadership* yielded more than six billion (yes, billion, not million) entries. And yet, many organizations appear to be doing a poor job identifying and preparing its next generation of leaders. Every year, surveys of business leaders consistently report that having a strong leadership pipeline is one of the top problems organizations face (Bauer, 2011; Charan, 2005; Conaty & Charan, 2010; Gurdjian, Halbeisen, & Lane, 2014; Harvey, Oelbaum, & Prager, 2015; Petriglieri, 2014; Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995).

Over the years, scholars have observed that on average one half of all managers derail (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2011), and nearly 40% of internal job moves involving high potentials end in failure (Martin & Schmidt, 2010). Researchers have found executives most often fail due to their inability to modify behaviors that were effective earlier in their careers but now cause problems—behaviors that once were nurtured, valued, and rewarded; behaviors that were shaped and molded over time and, ultimately, ingrained into their psyches. It appears that leaders who understand the necessity of behavioral change and possess the ability, willingness, and flexibility to lead based on the demands of the current situation are much more likely to be successful.

During the past two decades, a new concept has emerged to help organizations identify and develop such individuals. It is called “learning agility.” Learning agility is the ability to learn quickly and then the willingness and flexibility to apply those lessons to perform well in new and challenging leadership roles (De Meuse, 2017; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Perhaps, the underlying premise of learning agility was captured best in Marshall Goldsmith's advice to leaders when he cautioned them to realize that “what got you here won't get you there” (2007, p. 1). To continue down the path of success, leaders must change, adapt, grow, and develop. This capacity to learn from experience is what differentiates high potentials from other employees (De Meuse, Dai, & Hallenbeck, 2010; Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the need for “agility” at both the company level and the individual level. Initially, we investigate the changing corporate landscape. As an illustration, we track the Fortune 500 list during

its 65 years of existence. When it first appeared in 1955, society was entering a period of unprecedented growth. World War II and the Korean War were over and prosperity reined. The advent of computers and the Internet during the 1980s and 1990s created landmark technological changes. Suddenly, the benefits of established supply chains, recognized production practices, loyal employees, brand-name products, and time-honored ways of doing business became an encumbrance to adjusting to the new laws of the marketplace and workplace. Disruptive forces in communication, transportation, and innovation caused a reshuffling of economies and countries. And our world grew smaller as we came to realize what it truly meant to be global. Certainly, those changes did not wane during the first two decades of the 2000s. It is interesting to view the impact on how companies appeared and disappeared from the annual Fortune 500 listings.

In the chapter, we also examine how the relationship of employees and employers has evolved and review how it has influenced the way we lead people. In addition, we investigate the emergence of learning agility as a psychological construct: a construct that is perfectly suited to capture the dynamic, evolving attributes needed to lead during these turbulent times. Finally, we identify key behaviors associated with highly learning agile leaders as well as highly agile organizations. Our goal is to set the stage for the following chapters in this book, which we called *The Age of Agility*. It is our hope that the contents of this book will assist both practitioners and academicians in their quest to understand and apply learning agility in order to identify, select, and develop leaders for the twenty-first century.

The Changing Corporate Landscape

In some ways, the era of 10-year strategic plans and 30-year work anniversary watches does not seem that long ago. Organizations were planful, proactive, and carefully mapped out their futures in great detail. Employees joined organizations, worked hard, climbed the corporate ladder, and often spent their entire careers in one company. Life was orderly, stable, and predictable. For better or worse, that world no longer exists (see Friedman, 2006).

Certainly, technology has played a huge role in altering how companies and employees work, interact, and operate. It is difficult to fathom that the Internet is less than a generation old, and the smartphone was invented roughly a decade ago. Both inventions have influenced nearly every fiber of

our lives. However, many other factors have helped create this uncertain, dynamic, disorderly world we all work in today—both for organizations and for employees. The increasing role of big data and analytics, the growing number of employees who work virtually, the capability to conduct business globally, international and interdependent supply chains, the evolution of the human resources function and the emergence of talent management, the explosion of online assessments, and the proliferation of leadership coaching all have changed the global workspace in which we live.

Where once security, predictability, and order were valued, now chaos and flexibility reign. Where once jobs and the chain of command were clearly defined and fixed, now ambiguity, matrixed work environments, and constant role changes are commonplace. Where once full-time employment was the norm, it now is estimated that more than one fifth of all US workers—and even more globally—perform work under different arrangements (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Many years ago, Kurt Lewin (1952) proposed a three-stage theory of change, involving the process of “unfreezing the old,” “changing,” and “refreezing the new.” Today, it seems like we are in a constant state of “icy slush.” By the time we freeze in the new behavior, it is time to unfreeze it, and then change anew. Consequently, the “age of stability” has given way to a new age—“the age of agility!”

The Changing Face of Companies

It is enlightening to look at the list of the Fortune 500 companies over time to understand just how volatile the workplace has become. *Fortune* magazine has measured the size of US public companies by the amount of their annual sales revenues for more than a half century. The first listing of Fortune 500 companies was published in 1955. The list was led by General Motors during that year, reporting a total revenue of \$9.82 billion. In 2020, Walmart held the top position with more than \$523 billion.

Most interesting is the extent to which the ranking of companies has changed over time. If we focus exclusively on the Top 10 companies on the inaugural list, none is on the 2020 list. In other words, the roster of the 20 largest companies in the United States changed completely during this 65-year period (Table 1.1). Some of this turnover is likely due to the changing methodology *Fortune* has used to track companies. From 1955 to 1994,

Table 1.1 Fortune 500 Companies

1955 (Inaugural Year)	2020 (Most Recent Year)
1. General Motors	1. Walmart
2. US Steel	2. Amazon
3. General Electric	3. ExxonMobil
4. Esmark	4. Apple
5. Chrysler	5. CVS Health
6. Armour	6. Berkshire Hathaway
7. Gulf Oil	7. UnitedHealth Group
8. Socony Mobil Oil	8. McKesson
9. DuPont	9. AT&T
10. Amoco	10. AmerisourceBergen

Note. Some listings of the 1955 Fortune 500 companies name ExxonMobil as Number 2. We did not include it on our list because the ExxonMobil merger did not occur until 1989.

only businesses in manufacturing, mining, and the energy sectors were included. Subsequently, companies in the service sector also were included. Nevertheless, a similar pattern is observed when we examine the entire list of Fortune 500 companies over time. Only 52 (10%) of the companies on the 1955 list likewise appeared on the most recent list of the Fortune 500 (Table 1.2).

A similar story unfolds across the world. The Fortune Global 500 first appeared in its current form in 1995. When we look exclusively at the Top 10 global companies, only one company (Royal Dutch Shell) continues to appear on the list in 2020 (the most recent listing). Whereas companies headquartered in Japan dominated the list in 1995, companies located in China and the United States led the list in 2020 (Table 1.3). Today, the listing of the Global 500 is much more worldwide in scope, with companies headquartered in seven different countries on it as opposed to only three countries 25 years ago.

The bottom line is it takes far more than sheer size, market share, brand recognition, and corporate muscle to remain a Fortune 500 company. It also requires more than quality products, low prices, and sound financial planning to be a great company today. What it does take is constant change, adaptation, and evolution to new environmental conditions. Technologies are fluid, consumer needs and wants change, governmental regulations come and go, competitors become more cutthroat or change completely, and employee

Table 1.2 Fortune 500 Companies Appearing on *Both* the 1955 and 2020 Listings ($N = 52$)

3M	DuPont	Merck
Abbott Laboratories	Eli Lilly	Navistar (International)
Alcoa	General Dynamics	NCR
Archer Daniels Midland	General Electric	Northrop Grumman
Boeing	General Mills	O-I Glass (Owens-Illinois)
Bristol-Myers Squibb	General Motors	Owens Corning
Campbell Soup	Goodyear Tire & Rubber	Paccar
Caterpillar	Hershey	PepsiCo
Celanese	Honeywell International	Pfizer
Chevron	Hormel Foods	Procter & Gamble
Coca-Cola	IBM	Raytheon (Technologies)
Colgate-Palmolive	International Paper	Rockwell Automation
ConocoPhillips	Johnson & Johnson	Textron
Crown Holdings	Kellogg	United States Steel
Cummins	Kimberly-Clark	Viacom (CBS)
Dana	Lear	Weyerhaeuser
Deere	Lockheed Martin	Whirlpool
		Marathon Petroleum

needs and expectations shift. Always remember that tomorrow someone will be quicker, faster, cheaper, and smarter. Size does not matter—agility does!

Several factors have contributed to the need for organizational agility during the past 65 years. Obviously, one of the primary reasons for the changes is the explosion of technology. Such companies as Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon are less than 50 years old. Uber, Lyft, Airbnb, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube all are less than 15 years old. Even more impactful is the effect that technology has had on the operations of *every* company. Related to this increase of technology is the disappearance of the stable workplace. During much of the late 1980s and 1990s, organizational downsizing, corporate restructuring, and plant closings occurred (e.g., Sears, Boeing, Ford, IBM, Hewlett-Packard). No industry or employee level was immune (see De Meuse & Marks, 2003). And, obviously, when jobs disappear, employees disappear. Coworkers, mentors, and protégés go; colleagues and friends move on. Frequently, remaining employees are required to do more work, performing jobs that were accomplished by employees no longer there.

Table 1.3 Fortune Global 500 Companies

1995 (Inaugural Year)	2020 (Most Recent Year)
1. Mitsubishi: Japan	1. Walmart: USA
2. Mitsui: Japan	2. Sinopec Group: China
3. Itochu: Japan	3. State Grid: China
4. Sumitomo: Japan	4. China National Petroleum: China
5. General Motors: USA	5. Royal Dutch Shell: Netherlands
6. Marubeni: Japan	6. Saudi Aramco: Saudi Arabia
7. Ford: USA	7. Volkswagen: Germany
8. Exxon: USA	8. BP: Britain
9. Nissho Iwai: Japan	9. Amazon: USA
10. Royal Dutch Shell: Netherlands	10. Toyota: Japan

Note. Until 1989, the *Fortune Magazine* listed only non-US industrial corporations under the title “International 500,” while the Fortune 500 contained and continues to contain exclusively US companies. In 1990, US companies were added to compile a truly global list of top industrial corporations as ranked by annual sales. Since its current form in 1995, the Global 500 listing also includes top financial corporations and service providers by revenue.

In addition, increases in part-time, contract, temporary, and virtual workers (which were enabled by the new technologies) added to instability in the workplace. The “traditional job” and “traditional employee” are becoming less and less prevalent. Many of our parents and grandparents followed a similar career path. They worked in the same organization, located in the same city, performing basically the same job their entire lives. Their jobs tended to be fragmented, limited in scope, relatively unskilled, and repetitive. They had regular hours of work and full employee benefits. In many ways, the workplace of today bears little resemblance to the one 30 or 40 years ago. Individuals—and organizations—who thrive in this new work world embrace those changes. Agility is becoming more and more important for success in contemporary society.

The Changing Face of the Employee–Employer Relationship

In 1956, only 1 year after the first list of the Fortune 500 companies, William H. Whyte wrote a fascinating book, *The Organization Man*. In it,

he described a corporate America where an employee invested “himself” totally into “his” company, working 40–50 or more hours a week, traveling on the road whenever and wherever needed, and relocating on a moment’s notice. In return, the employer provided a good job with good pay and benefits, gave annual wage increases, and offered ample opportunities for advancement. The employee gave unquestioned loyalty, and the employer granted continuous financial security. It was a so-called cradle-to-grave relationship (Rousseau, 1989).

The foundation of this type of relationship was based on mutual trust between employee and employer. Arrangements such as a “fair day’s pay” for a “fair day’s work” did not need to be spelled out. Each party knew and respected the other; they were in it for the long haul. Much has changed during the past six decades (De Meuse & Tornow, 1990). The former relationship of order, stability, and permanence has given way to one based largely on independence and self-reliance—in America and around the globe. Today, we live in a period of decreased job security, fewer employee benefits, and career lattices rather than ladders. We also live in an era of a greater focus on work–life balance, enhanced career mobility, and unparalleled job opportunities regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity. The work environment is weaving a new tapestry, one that is based on a fluid, diversity-oriented employment model rather than a fixed, homogeneous one. This evolving work arrangement not only requires new job roles and responsibilities but also offers fresh opportunities, for both employees and organizations (Table 1.4). However, this new work agreement likewise requires agility, for both employees and organizations.

The Changing Face of Leadership

Effective leaders, dating back to the Industrial Age, applied a directive, authoritarian—almost dictatorial—style of management. Individuals who were bestowed positions of power made all the important team and organizational decisions. For example, managers planned, organized, budgeted, directed, and evaluated all activities related to their workgroup. Employees were expected to comply with orders from the boss, not make waves, and show blind loyalty to their organization. The more fortunate employees had leaders who were paternalistic and viewed it as their role to protect those who reported to them. It was a militaristic style of supervision, rooted largely in

Table 1.4 The Old and New Employee–Employer Relationship

Employee’s Responsibilities and Expectations	Employer’s Responsibilities and Expectations
The Old Relationship	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair day’s work • Acceptable performance • Above-average performance • Organizational loyalty • Relatively stable job requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair day’s pay • Continued employment • Hierarchical advancement • Job security • Slow, modest change required
The New Relationship	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on personal needs and work–life balance • Responsible for own career • Develop experience portfolios for advancement • Seek legal protection if wronged • Self-reliance • Continuous organizational changes expected • Agility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on company goals • Duty is corporate growth/survival • Create robust/flexible talent pools • Seek legal protection if wronged • Self-reliance • Ongoing market/technological adjustments • Agility

people’s experiences from World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Even the managerial nomenclature from this era suggested a relatively demeaning, controlling approach to leadership (e.g., hired hand, span of control, subordinate).

The face of leadership today is very different in most organizations (Table 1.5). Likewise, the expectations held by and for employees are equally different during the digital era. Organizations do not simply hire “hands,” but brains and hearts too. Employees are expected to show initiative, accept responsibility, be flexible, communicate solutions as well as problems, and demonstrate an ability and willingness to change. The archaic militaristic paradigm fostered docile, compliant, and complacent employees. Leadership today must engage, empower, facilitate teamwork, and foster an environment of inclusion and diversity. Successful leaders have learned how to listen (as well as direct) and share decision-making. Most importantly, they must understand the appropriate skills to deploy in an ever-changing context. Once again, agility is required.

Table 1.5 The Changing Role of Leadership

Industrial Age	Digital Era
• Planning	• Delegating
• Organizing	• Facilitating
• Budgeting	• Involving
• Telling	• Listening
• Directing	• Coaching
• Judging	• Supporting
• Controlling	• Empowering
• Motivating	• Inspiring/engaging

This capacity to learn and adapt with agility is particularly critical for individuals in—and those aspiring to—leadership positions (Harvey & Donohue, 2013). As individuals traverse the leadership pipeline, new skills, competencies, and behaviors are required for success (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001). Leaders must learn to abandon many former behaviors and competencies that contributed to their prior success. Simultaneously, they need to embrace and develop new ones that now are required to perform effectively. The term *learning agility* captures this ability and willingness to learn, grow, and evolve during one’s career.

To help individuals develop, it should be recognized that the profession of leadership coaching likewise has changed greatly during the past couple of decades. At one time, leadership coaching was directed exclusively at managers who were derailing. It was deemed that such managers would benefit from “remedial” coaching. It often represented a last ditch effort by the organization to “save” a senior-level manager or executive before termination. Naturally, there was a stigma associated with being assigned a coach; it was a sign that the leader needed help or “fixing.”

Much has changed during the past several years. Today, a majority of senior-level managers in large- and medium-size companies have a leadership coach (Zenger & Stinnett, 2006). In most cases, the services are viewed as “developmental” not “remedial.” It has become a status symbol more than a stigma. The ability to talk with a specialist in the field of leadership represents a significant organizational investment in the development and growth of an important contributor to the success of the company. The concept of learning agility plays a significant role in an individual’s journey into

effective leadership. Indeed, learning agility not only increases survival, but also drives innovation.

The Emergence and Importance of Learning Agility

The concept of learning agility began to emerge in part as a result of the seminal book, appropriately titled, *The Lessons of Experience* by Morgan McCall, Michael Lombardo, and Ann Morrison (1988). These three researchers from the Center for Creative Leadership investigated why executives had succeeded or derailed in their careers and discovered all executives had much in common. Both groups of executives (a) were bright and ambitious, (b) had been identified as high potentials early in their careers, (c) had noteworthy records of achievement, and (d) willingly made personal and family sacrifices to advance their careers.

However, the researchers also discovered the group of executives who had derailed differed from the successful ones in three critical ways. First, the derailed executives tended to rely heavily on a narrow set of technical skills they had developed early in their careers and applied in current situations (even though it hampered their performance). Thus, their technical superiority—which was a source of success at lower levels of leadership—became a weakness as they ascended to higher levels, often resulting in overconfidence and arrogance. Second, derailed and successful executives differed in the way they dealt with mistakes. Leaders who derailed tended to be defensive about their failures, attempting to keep problems hidden while they tried to fix them, or they tended to blame others for their predicament. In contrast, those executives who were successful overwhelmingly handled failure with poise and grace. They admitted mistakes, accepted responsibility, and then attempted to correct the problems. And third, and most importantly, the derailed executives seemed unwilling or unable to change, adapt, and learn from their experiences. Frequently, they repeated the same behaviors that led to poor performance and/or previous mistakes. To the contrary, successful leaders willingly let go of old ways of doing things, experimented with new approaches and behaviors, and then latched onto the new ones that worked. It was their *willingness and ability to learn from experience* that appeared to be the major reason why those executives succeeded. Hence, the foundational elements of learning agility were identified.

Many other researchers also contributed to the origins of learning agility. For example, Beck, Cox, and Radcliff (1980) emphasized the importance of developing “learning to learn” skills as part of management education during this time. Likewise, Cynthia McCauley published a review of studies in 1986 that focused on life events in leadership development. Longitudinal studies conducted at AT&T dating back to the 1970s and 1980s reported that leaders who had been classified low on potential often were much more successful than expected when they had relevant developmental opportunities (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Howard & Bray, 1988). Extensive research on the experiences, relationships, and practices that contribute to the development of leadership was also conducted at Honeywell during the 1980s (Schmidt, 1988).

Scholars in nearly every discipline (e.g., art, music, medicine, sports, and leadership) have observed that gaining expertise is largely the result of intentional experience and deliberate practice (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007)—not merely extensive practice, but mindful, intentional, and sustained effort. Skilled individuals reflect on their behaviors and then make appropriate modifications in future situations. Author Malcolm Gladwell (2008) estimated that it takes 10,000 hours of such practice before one becomes an “expert” in an area. Ironically, highly learning agile (i.e., high-potential) leaders seldom remain in a position long enough to master performance at the expert level before moving on to their next job. Organizational decision-makers should realize this is a natural outcome for leaders. Leaders do not need to become technical or functional experts (i.e., so-called high professionals). Rather, high potentials need to be exposed to new, varied situations and diverse experiences in order to develop their leadership skills. Equally important, organizational decision-makers should recognize the necessity of accelerating learning for their high-potential talent since they spend such limited time in specific roles.

The Construct of Learning Agility Takes Shape

Prior to the 1990s, most organizations classified high-potential leaders as possessing “the right stuff.” This approach was popularized by the 1983 movie by the same name, which explored how test pilots were identified and the original seven astronauts were selected by NASA. The objective of most succession planning programs at the time was to look for early signs of

those right stuff skills and competencies in professionals just beginning their careers.

Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger, the authors who coined the term *learning agility*, argued that when personal attributes are relatively stable over long periods of time (e.g., intelligence, certain personality traits), it makes sense to apply such an approach. However, they asked, “What evidence exists that a promising 25-year-old looks like a younger version of a 50-year-old successful executive?” (2000, p. 321). They surmised that if individuals learn, grow, and develop across time, comparing the leadership competencies of a 25-year-old with a 50-year-old is not very informative. From their perspective, “Identifying those who can learn to behave in new ways requires a different measurement strategy from those often employed, one that looks at the characteristics of the learning agile” (2000, p. 321). Consequently, they asserted that *learning from experience* plays a critical role with regard to how an individual demonstrates what is termed *high-potential leadership*. In a sequel to the *Lessons of Experience* book, Morgan McCall (1998) also emphasized the importance of learning from experience as the key distinction between those employees who are high potentials and those who are not.

Lombardo and Eichinger defined learning agility as “the willingness and ability to learn new competencies in order to perform under first-time, tough, or different conditions” (2000, p. 323). They posited a conceptual framework of learning agility consisting of the following four dimensions:

- **People Agility**—the degree to which people know themselves, learn from experience, treat others well, and are calm and resilient under pressure.
- **Change Agility**—the extent to which people are curious, like to experiment, are passionate about new ideas, and engage in skill-building activities.
- **Results Agility**—the level to which people achieve results, inspire others, and exhibit a personal presence that builds confidence in others.
- **Mental Agility**—the degree to which people are comfortable with complexity and ambiguity, think through problems from a unique point of view, and can explain their thinking to others.

In their 2000 study, Lombardo and Eichinger developed a multirater assessment to measure learning agility and administered it to 217 employees. They also collected supervisory ratings of “performance potential” for each of

those employees and found a strong, statistically significant relationship between performance potential and each of those four dimensions of learning agility, ranging from a high of $r = 0.52$ (people agility) to a low of $r = 0.47$ (mental agility). Overall, the relationship between performance potential and the four scores of learning agility was $R^2 = 0.30$ ($p < .001$). These findings clearly reinforced the notion of an empirical linkage between learning agility and leadership potential.

Learning Agility Goes Mainstream

The number of dimensions thought to comprise learning agility, as well as the protocol used to measure it, have changed markedly during the past 20 years. Originally, learning agility was assessed by a multirater instrument called *Choices*[™] (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). A fifth dimension—“Self-Awareness”—was added a decade later when the *viaEDGE*[™] self-assessment was developed by Eichinger and his associates (see De Meuse et al., 2011). In the *Choices* multirater assessment, the concept of self-awareness was embedded in the people agility dimension.

Other conceptual frameworks and assessments have been devised during the past several years as well. For example, Ken De Meuse and his colleagues created the *TALENTx7*[®] *Assessment*, which postulates seven dimensions of learning agility as opposed to five (De Meuse, Lim, & Rao, 2019). The two additional dimensions of learning agility incorporated by those authors are “Environmental Mindfulness” and “Feedback Responsiveness.” Warner Burke and his coauthors also developed an assessment. The *Burke Learning Agility Inventory*[™] (or *BLAI*) measures nine dimensions of learning agility (Burke, Roloff, & Mitchinson, 2016). The newer assessments use different labels to identify the various dimensions due to the proprietary nature of *Choices* and *viaEDGE*. However, all of these measures appear to be capturing many of the same underlying components of the construct (Table 1.6).

During the past several years, the acceptance of learning agility as an indicator of leadership talent has increased dramatically throughout the business world. A recent survey found that learning agility was the most frequently used criterion to measure leadership potential, with 62% of the respondents citing it; cultural fit (28%), emotional intelligence (24%), personality (14%), and intelligence (13%) were identified much less often (*Potential: Who’s Doing What*, 2015). Likewise, Church, Rotolo, Ginther, and Levine (2015)

Table 1.6 Dimensions of Learning Agility Measured by Three Different Assessments

<i>viaEDGE™</i>	<i>TALENTx7®</i>	<i>BLAI</i>
People agility	Interpersonal acumen	Collaborating Interpersonal risk-taking
Mental agility	Cognitive perspective	Flexibility
Results agility	Drive to excel	—
Change agility	Change alacrity	Experimenting Performance risk-taking
Self-awareness	Self-insight	Feedback seeking Reflecting
	Environmental mindfulness	—
	Feedback responsiveness	—
		Speed Information gathering

found that more than one half of the companies they sampled used learning agility/ability as an assessment for identifying high potentials (56%) and selecting senior executives (51%). Blog postings, media outlets, and consulting firms tout the virtues of learning agility on a daily basis. Business books likewise have extolled how vital it is to leadership performance.

Beyond the assessment of high potentials, learning agility increasingly has permeated the leadership development function. While it is not always referred to as learning agility, most leading organizations encourage leaders to expand their capacity to learn from experience. For example, the idea that leaders should develop their ability to learn from experiences (70%), others (20%), as well as through more formal processes (10%), is accepted widely in organizations (Kajewski & Madsen, 2012). Ironically, despite its common use, it remains unclear who originated the specific “70–20–10” formula or whether there is firm empirical evidence for those ratios (McCall, 2010).

Embedding the development of learning agility “habits” in leadership programs also has become common in many organizations today (e.g., Procter & Gamble, IBM, Nestle Purina, Brown-Forman, and Bank of America). For illustration, simulations and role plays have been used to help develop leaders’ ability to learn more nimbly by experiencing the benefits of iterative experimentation, active feedback seeking, and purposeful reflection (Harvey & Donohue, 2013). Coaches can be also instrumental by supporting

leaders in the development of specific leadership skills, such as delegation and time management, while at the same time helping them develop learning agile behaviors (e.g., strategic thinking, self-reflection, and environmental mindfulness).

The intriguing notion of possessing a “fixed” versus a “growth” mindset—and how it relates to how people learn and develop—also has contributed to the popularity of the learning agility construct during recent years. Carol Dweck observed that schoolchildren who had a fixed mindset tended to view their basic abilities such as intelligence as fixed traits (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Those children believed they were born with a specific (or fixed) amount, and that it is all they ever will possess. Therefore, Dweck found that performance mistakes lowered their self-confidence because they attributed the mistakes to a lack of ability (which they felt powerless to change). On the other hand, children with a growth mindset tended to view their intelligence as malleable and that it could be developed through education and hard work. Hence, those students believed mistakes stemmed from a lack of effort or acquirable skills, and that their mistakes could be corrected through perseverance. They perceived the brain (IQ) as a muscle that grows stronger with exercise. Ironically, those students perceived that failure causes learning more than success does. Dweck concluded that people with a growth mindset do not define mistakes as failure. Rather, they conceptualize them more like, “This didn’t work. I’m a problem-solver. What else can I try?” (also see Dweck, 2019).

In a similar vein, Heslin, VandeWalle, and Latham (2006) found that managers who had a fixed mindset were less likely to seek or welcome feedback from their employees than were managers with a growth mindset. Those authors stated that managers with a growth mindset see themselves as works in progress and understand they need feedback to improve, whereas leaders with a fixed mindset are more likely to perceive feedback as criticism reflecting their underlying level of incompetence. Interestingly, the authors also observed executives with a fixed mindset were less likely to mentor their underlings, assuming that other people also were not capable of changing either (see also Heslin & Keating, 2017).

Defining Learning Agility

Despite this popularity, there is a lack of clarity about how learning agility relates to leadership development and leader success (De Meuse, Dai,

Swisher, Eichinger, & Lombardo, 2012; DeRue, Ashford, & Myers, 2012). There remains disagreement among scholars and practitioners alike with regard to its precise definition, how to measure it, how to develop it, and how it relates to other psychological constructs (see De Meuse, 2017). Nevertheless, the essence of the construct remains based on the foundational work of Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger. Most definitions of the construct assert—either explicitly or implicitly—that learning from experience is the crucial component (De Meuse, 2017; DeRue et al., 2012; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Likewise, most definitions include both ability and willingness components (Burke et al., 2016; De Meuse et al., 2010; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Finally, most definitions posit learning agility is most important for leadership roles.

Consequently, it seems prudent to define learning agility broadly to capture all of its complexity and nuances, recognizing there may be some loss of conceptual clarity and rigor. In addition, it is important to define learning agility in a way that it adds value to leadership selection and developmental efforts within organizations (Hezlett & Kuncel, 2012). Most scientists, as well as practitioners in consulting firms, agree on the following four points:

- Theorize learning agility as a multidimensional psychological construct;
- Conceptualize it in terms of learning from work and life experiences;
- Posit that it can be used as a key predictor of leadership potential; and
- Recommend that learning agility should be considered as an important component in leadership identification and development.

Thus, for parsimony and to capitalize on the construct's ongoing utility for leadership selection and development, we define learning agility as *the ability and willingness to learn from experience and then apply those lessons to perform well in new and challenging leadership situations* (see also De Meuse, 2017).

The Relationship of Learning Agility and Leader Success

Conceptually, the linkage between learning agility, effective adaption, and leader success is logical. However, it is important to examine what the empirical literature supports. One of the most definitive studies to examine the relationship between learning agility and high-potential leadership was

conducted by Dries, Vantilborgh, and Pepermans (2012). Those researchers measured job performance and learning agility among employees in seven different organizations. They found that both performance and learning agility were statistically related to being classified as a high potential. More specifically, the authors observed high-performing employees were three times more likely to be identified as a high potential than employees with low performance. However, they found that being high in learning agility increased an employee's likelihood of being classified as a high potential by a factor of 18. They concluded that "learning agility is an overriding criterion for separating high potentials from non-high potentials" (Dries et al., 2012, p. 351).

Dai, De Meuse, and Tang (2013) conducted two separate field studies—one cross-sectional and one longitudinal—to explore the relationship between learning agility and leader success. In Study 1, the authors found learning agility was significantly related to the following two *objective* career outcomes at a large multinational consumer products corporation: (a) total compensation and (b) chief executive officer proximity. This study also observed a significant relationship between learning agility and ratings of leadership competence. In Study 2, the authors found learning agility was significantly correlated with career growth trajectory at a global pharmaceutical company. Highly learning agile individuals were promoted more often and received higher salary increases than their lower learning agile counterparts over a 10-year period. Dai and his colleagues concluded that "learning agility is crucial for leaders as they attempt to adapt to the constantly changing, complex business environment organizations face today" (2013, p. 128).

Recently, Ken De Meuse (2019) performed a meta-analysis to scientifically examine the relationship between learning agility and leadership. Meta-analysis is a statistical procedure researchers apply to combine data across multiple studies. It integrates the findings of many studies by computing a pooled estimate of the true "effect size." The statistical results of each individual study are weighted by the studies' respective sample size (see Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). In addition, statistical corrections are implemented to correct methodological errors in sampling and psychological measurement. The advantage of this approach is the aggregation of information, leading to higher statistical power and a more robust estimate than is possible from the findings derived from any one study. It enables one to scientifically derive an estimate of the actual or true relationship between learning agility and

leadership in the population. The Greek lowercase letter rho (ρ) is used to depict the corrected “population” correlation coefficient.

In the meta-analysis, De Meuse (2019) investigated the empirical linkage between learning agility and both leader *performance* and leader *potential* in 20 field studies. Overall, data from a total of 4,897 employees were analyzed. The majority of participants were identified clearly as managers or executives ($n = 3,337$; 68%). Others were classified by the authors of the studies as a combination of both managers and nonmanagers ($n = 1,422$; 29%). A few participants appeared to be high-level professionals, with occupations such as engineer, law enforcement officer, and physician ($n = 138$; 3%). Twelve of the 20 studies (60%) used self-assessments of learning agility, whereas, 8 studies (40%) applied multirater approaches to evaluate learning agility. One study used a self-assessment, a multirater assessment, and an interview protocol to measure the construct. Leader success was assessed in a variety of ways. However, nearly all—18 of the 20 studies—used ratings of either current performance and/or potential as the criterion. In most cases, the immediate supervisor provided the ratings. Objective outcomes (e.g., number of promotions, average annual salary increases) were used in a few of the studies.

In total, 41 correlation coefficients were reported in the 20 field studies, ranging from a low of $r = 0.08$ to a high of $r = 0.91$. Of the 41 coefficients, 34 were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level or higher. The overall mean correlation coefficient across all the studies was $\bar{r} = 0.47$ ($N = 10,402$, $p < .001$), indicating a very strong relationship between learning agility and the success of leaders. Thirty of the 41 correlations examined the specific link between learning agility and *leader performance*; the mean was $= 0.47$ ($n = 7,006$, $p < .001$). Eleven correlation coefficients explored the relationship between learning agility and *leader potential*; the mean coefficient was $= 0.48$ ($n = 3,396$, $p < .001$).

Subsequently, De Meuse (2019) corrected for sampling errors and unreliability of measurement in the 20 field studies to estimate the true relationship between learning agility and leader success. Once corrected, the population correlation coefficient between learning agility and leader *performance* increased to $\rho = 0.74$ and between learning agility and leader *potential* to $\rho = 0.75$. Interestingly, De Meuse (2019) also contrasted those findings with the extant literature investigating the relationship between job performance and IQ ($\rho = 0.65$) and job performance and EQ ($\rho = 0.32$ or 0.23 , depending on whether EQ was measured as a series of personality traits or as a set of

behaviors, respectively). Clearly, the results of this research indicated that the empirical relationship between learning agility and leader success is a very robust one.

Moving Leaders and Organizations into the Twenty-First Century

Perhaps no other factor is more important to organizational success than identifying, preparing, and developing the next generation of leaders. Similar to how DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) carries the genetic instructions used in the functioning, growth, and reproduction of all living organisms, it can be argued that the selection and development of tomorrow's leaders is the DNA responsible for the financial performance and organizational health of a company's future.

This chapter highlights the importance of learning agility to accomplish it. Times change, and learning agility provides the genetic blueprint to enable leaders to understand those changes, embrace the new behaviors and competencies they require, and inspire others to perform in the new normal. We live in an era when stability and predictability have given way to disorder and agility. As Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock* (1970), had prognosticated, we have entered an age where, "The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." Effective leaders are effective learners. Successful organizations are agile ones.

While there is a rich history of learning research in psychology, dating back to the early experiments of Ivan Pavlov with salivating dogs and B. F. Skinner with maze-running rats, the construct of learning agility is more recent. It has much more to do with the application of learning and performance success than simply making a connection automatically between a stimulus and a response. Learning agility focuses on human behavior, high-level mental processing, and the transference of lessons learned in one setting and nimbly applying them in a different one. It includes experimentation, risk-taking, self-reflection, continuous improvement, mindfulness, resilience, and cognitively connecting experiences obtained in one situation to different challenges in another. During the past few years, there has been a renewed emphasis on the development of leadership and learning agility (see De Meuse, 2020; Harvey et al., 2017; Swisher, 2012).

Developing Learning Agility

Many, if not most, organizations today devote much time and effort to their succession planning efforts. Annual talent reviews, international assignments, 9-box models, mentorship programs, and executive coaching are commonplace. Yet, it is important to understand that being learning agile does not come naturally to everyone, particularly those individuals who were educated in technical disciplines (e.g., accounting, engineering, finance, law, the sciences). Employees who master expertise on a single set of skills easily can fall victim to honing those skills rather than continuing to grow and evolve in their careers.

As the term *learning agility* implies, individuals who are learning agile “learn” from their experiences and are able to apply that knowledge to future roles. Those employees possess the “agility” to alter their behaviors as situations and job role changes dictate, *letting go of old behaviors* no longer required (or that actually hamper performance) as well as *latching onto new behaviors* that now are necessary. Everyone has a certain amount of learning agility. Moreover, if one is willing and motivated, he or she can develop more of it. However, it is important for us to recognize that most behavioral changes are difficult. We have become the leaders we are due to many years of practice. Our organizations have rewarded us for this behavior. It is part of our identity. It is who we are!

We need to always remember that if behavioral changes were easy, diet books and smoking cessation programs would not be needed. Behavioral changes—both individually and organizationally—require courage, much effort, focus, discipline, determination, and perseverance. Changes make us feel awkward. We typically are not very good performing the new behaviors at first—our current behavioral patterns have become so natural, so automatic, so ingrained. Yet, unless we change such patterns, we will never grow, evolve, or develop as leaders. And, in turn, our organizations will stagnate, fall behind, and eventually die.

Unfortunately, there is no magic pill or secret formula. If changes were easy, all employees—as well as all organizations—would be dynamic, responsive, and successful. Succession plans always would identify winners and losers. There would be no such terms as “managerial derailment” or “executive derailment.” The Fortune 500 lists of companies would have little turnover.

Organizational Support for Agility Learning

Organizational decision-makers have recognized the importance of learning and evolving for many years. Peter Senge introduced the concept of the “learning organization” in his 1990 classic book, *The Fifth Discipline*. He defined such organizations as those “where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people continually learn how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3). Several other scholars have contributed to this work, which focuses more on the development of learning systems and dynamic corporate structures than on individual learning per se (e.g., Garvin, 1993; Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1991).

There also is a long history of research on organizational change and development. Authors such as Richard Beckhard (1969), Edgar Huse (1980), and Wendell French and Cecil Bell (1973) have written textbooks, explaining how organizational strategies, structures, processes, and cultures influence employees’ behaviors, attitudes, and performance levels. Change agents, OD interventions, and action learning were promoted by those authors as helping organizations adjust and grow. More recently, the OD field has expanded to focus on aligning organizations with their rapidly changing and complex business environments through organizational learning, knowledge management, and the transformation of organizational norms and values.

Learning agility and organizational change agility are highly interrelated. For example, in his book, *Leading Change*, John Kotter (1996) emphasized the importance of lifelong learning for leaders in order for them to successfully manage complex organizational changes. He described a study of 115 students from Harvard Business School’s class of 1974 and how their competitive drive and strong willingness to learn helped their companies adapt to the rapidly shifting global economy.

The literature on learning organizations and organizational development highlights the importance of a number of organizational factors that influence an individual’s learning agility and change. For example, bureaucratic structures, risk-averse cultures, unduly strict company policies, and micro-management practices likely inhibit the development of learning agility. In contrast, a psychologically safe environment can foster inquiry and dialogue. It provides learning opportunities and managerial support, both keys for developing agile learners (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Edmondson,

2019; Garvin, 1993; Kerka, 1995). As leaders and organizations move into the twenty-first century, there has never been a more critical time to acknowledge the transformational power of learning agility in weathering (and embracing!) the waves of change.

The Purpose of This Book

Despite the popularity of learning agility during the past decade, there are numerous questions that still need to be answered. Some of them relate to such fundamental issues as (a) What specifically is learning agility? (b) How many facets or dimensions does it have? (c) How do we measure it? and (d) Can it be developed? Other questions are a little more nuanced. For example,

- Is learning agility genetic? If so, what aspects are fixed versus malleable?
- What are the theoretical underpinnings of the construct? How does it relate to the Big Five personality traits? Is learning agility related to intelligence? How so?
- If we assume learning agility can be developed, what specifically can individuals do to grow it? What can managers do to foster it? How can organizations encourage and support it? What do managers and organizations do to inadvertently stifle it?
- What strategies contribute the most to the velocity and flexibility of learning? Are certain strategies more or less effective for different leaders?
- Is a high amount of learning agility necessary for all jobs? If not, which ones? Why?
- Do all organizations require the same level of learning agility for their leaders? For their employees?
- Does the amount of learning agility required increase or decrease as leaders climb the organizational ladder?
- Is it true that the more learning agile your workforce is the better? Why not?
- Are older people more—or less—learning agile? Why?

Much of what we know about the construct of learning agility has been gleaned from its application by practitioners. While this knowledge is an

extremely useful place to begin, our hope is to undergird this understanding with science.

Thus, the purpose of this book is to distill both the research and the practice of learning agility in three areas: (a) individual differences in learning agility, (b) leader behaviors that facilitate and inhibit the development of learning agility, and (c) organizational cultures and talent management practices that support or hamper the growth of learning agility (Figure 1.1).

Our goal is to help academicians, researchers, and all students of organizational behavior—as well as talent management professionals, managers, and executives—understand the psychological construct of learning agility and apply it effectively. Section I focuses on the construct of learning agility itself, its theoretical foundation, how to measure it, and how it can be applied as a predictor of leader performance and potential. The neuroscience of the construct and the changing nature of leadership over the years also are addressed in the chapters. Section II addresses the development of learning agility. The initial chapter of this section presents a heuristic model of the construct, followed by chapters reviewing various components of the model, such as mindfulness, getting out of one’s comfort zone, feedback seeking, reflection, and resilience. A chapter examining how “being in a learning mode” (i.e., possessing a growth vs. fixed mindset) influences learning agility is presented. In Section III, organizational and talent management practices that support and enhance learning agility are reviewed. A framework for building a learning agile organization is posited as well as specific recommendations for building learning agile organizations (e.g., creating a

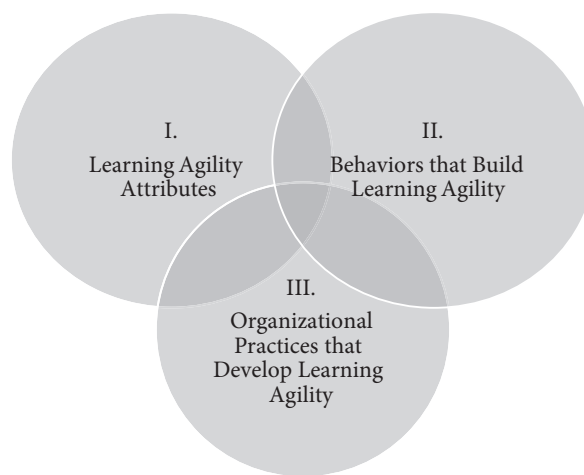


Figure 1.1 Overview of learning agility and its development.

psychological safe workplace, coaching the “whole person” as a leader) are discussed. One of the chapters reports specific characteristics of the top companies for developing learning agile leaders.

Finally, Section IV—Lessons and Applications—concludes the book with a chapter summarizing and integrating the key learnings from all the chapters. Specific implementation lessons for leaders and organizations are highlighted. Research gaps are explored. We also propose a nomonological network of variables and their interrelationships for the future study of the learning agility construct. In addition, we provide readers a series of 10 case studies examining how organizations have applied learning agility in their talent management and leadership practices. The cases are from a variety of organizations, ranging from school systems to healthcare organizations to Fortune 500 companies such as Procter & Gamble, IBM, and Johnson & Johnson. Organizations are based in the United States as well as in China and Australia. All of the case studies are written by practitioners. They identify how the concept of learning agility was introduced into their organizations, difficulties and pleasant surprises they experienced, and successes and drawbacks they observed. It is hoped those lessons will provide a roadmap of best practices for our readers.

Our overall objective of this book is to offer a status update on where learning agility is today, how to apply it successfully in business, and provide scientists future directions to research. We invite you to join us on our journey to more deeply understand—and practice—agile learning.

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