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THE SCIENCE AND APPLICATION OF LEARNING AGILITY: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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This article introduces a special issue of the *Consulting Psychology Journal* focused on the science and application of learning agility. Although the construct of learning agility has been used by many organizations around the world as a means to identify and develop leadership talent during the past 2 decades, much about it remains unclear. For example, there are different viewpoints about its definition, its measurement, and even its importance to leader success. In this introductory article, the historical recognition of leadership in organizations is briefly explored, and the emergence of learning agility as a critical component to identify and develop leaders is reviewed. Sections on the application and the science of learning agility examine the popularity of the construct today and provide the psychological linkage to other established theories and research in our field. The underlying hope of this special issue is to stimulate more scholarly investigations into clarifying the construct and offer talent-management professionals, leadership coaches, and consulting psychologists guidance when implementing learning agility in their client organizations.

What's It Mean? Implications for Consulting Psychology

The popularity of learning agility has grown markedly in the business world as an approach to assist organizations with identifying and developing its current and future leaders. Although more research has been devoted to understanding the construct during the past few years, there remains confusion about what learning agility is, how to measure it, and how to apply it properly. The purpose of this article and the entire special issue is to clarify this relatively new approach to high-potential talent identification and development.

Keywords: learning agility, leadership, high-potential talent, talent management, coaching

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Compared to such established constructs in psychology as personality and intelligence, learning agility is a neophyte. Although the general concept of learning goes back to the times of Ivan Pavlov and B. F. Skinner, the specific term *learning agility* initially was formulated by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), a mere 2 decades ago. During this short period, the business world has latched onto learning agility unabashedly—almost without scrutiny (De Meuse, 2017a). Paradoxically, the academic community has shown little interest in the term, ignoring or rejecting the concept almost completely—almost cavalierly. It seems in some ways that the gap between the worlds of scholarship and application of learning agility is nearly as wide as the political divide in much of our country today. Each side has made assumptions about the construct, its scientific integrity, its psychometric foundation, its conceptual relationship with leadership, and its importance to the identification, selection, and development of leaders.

The purpose of this special issue is to investigate the construct of learning agility more objectively and hopefully with a little less emotion. In total, 16 professionals have contributed their wisdom, expertise, and experience to craft articles for this issue. Nearly all of the authors hold PhD degrees in industrial/organizational psychology and cumulatively have more than 300 years of experience as business consultants, leadership coaches, talent-management experts, and organizational researchers. Our goal is to investigate learning agility in terms of what we know, what we do not know yet, and what we need to know to make it a viable construct for scholars to study and for practitioners to apply it as an integral component of talent management. We devote much effort to exploring how learning agility has evolved, how it has been measured, and how it has been used by organizations to select and develop current and future leaders. We also examine the neuroscience behind the construct and discuss how learning agility can be developed. Overall, we hope to provide academicians with specific directions on where more research is needed and offer talent-management professionals concrete guidance for implementing learning agility in their organizations.

Leadership and the Learning-Agility Construct

The importance of leadership in organizations has been recognized for thousands of years. Armies were led by generals, colonels, majors, captains, and lieutenants for as long as recorded history. Monarchies had kings and queens, princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses, and so on. Even religious organizations have popes, bishops, rabbis, elders, shamans, and priests to lead their faithful. The difficulty lies in how we select those leaders. How do we ensure those leaders will place the needs of the organization ahead of their personal interests? How do we ensure those leaders will be accepted by their subordinates and other stakeholders? How do we foster an organizational structure and culture that will support those individuals? And, ultimately, how do we identify and develop the next generation of leaders to ensure continued success of the organization? The Industrial Revolution of the 1880s added urgency to answering these questions. At this historic turning point, it became widely recognized that leadership in most organizations was not a birthright or an anointing but rather a need to identify and groom those individuals best capable to manage and lead the business.

Fast forward to the 1950s and 1960s. Gradually, organizations began to invest more time and effort in leadership. Academic scholars and organizational researchers alike studied what successful (and unsuccessful) managers looked like, how they behaved, and what role the environment played in their effectiveness. The trait theories, behavioral theories, and situation theories were proposed (e.g., Fleishman & Harris, 1962; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Stogdill, 1948). The importance of identifying, preparing, and developing individuals for future roles in leadership became even more apparent. During the 1970s, companies such as Sears, AT&T, IBM, and General Electric created "succession plans" to ensure a smooth transition for the next generation of leaders (see Bentz, 1967; Bray et al., 1974; Dodd, 1970; Meyer, 1970).

The beginnings of learning agility can be traced back to the research conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership during the mid-1980s. The seminal book titled *The Lessons of Experience* demonstrated that successful executives were distinctly different from those who derailed (McCall et al., 1988). The authors observed that successful leaders viewed their job duties and organizational

requirements through a wider lens than their peers, worked effectively with all types of people, willingly experimented to try new approaches, actively sought and accepted feedback, took risks, made mistakes, and experienced setbacks but were resilient and persevered to achieve their goals. They were willing and able to let go of old behaviors and formerly important skill sets and readily latched onto new ones as situations dictated. They *learned* differently (see De Meuse, 2022). Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) referred to this pattern of personal behaviors as "learning agility." More specifically, they defined learning agility as "the willingness and ability to learn new competencies in order to perform under first-time, tough, or different conditions" (p. 323).

Application of Learning Agility

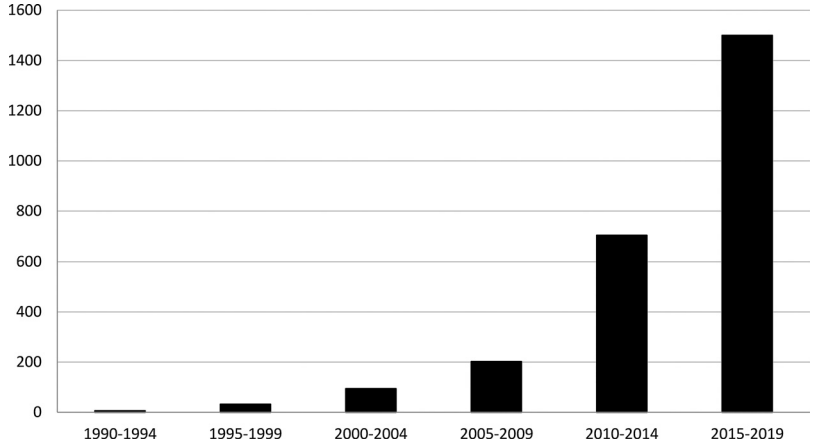
During the past 10 years, learning agility has been one of the most often used assessments to identify and forecast leadership talent in organizations (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021). For example, a 2015 survey of large companies conducted by the New Talent Management Network (2015) reported that learning agility was the number one criterion applied to measure leadership potential. Similarly, Allan Church and his colleagues conducted a survey of 80 international corporations and found learning agility/ability was used by 56% of the corporations to identify high-potential leaders and by 51% of them to select senior executives (Church et al., 2015). They reported that only leadership competencies were incorporated more frequently to assess high-potentials and senior executives.

The increasing popularity of learning agility also can be observed in the business press and certain areas of the psychological literature. Figure 1 presents the number of times the term was identified by Google Scholar in 5-year increments during the past 30 years. As expected, few references mentioning the general concept of learning agility were published during the 1990s because the term itself was not formally coined until the year 2000. Beginning in the early 2000s, the attention given to learning agility expanded markedly, increasing from 94 publications during 2000–2004 to 202 in 2005–2009, to 705 in 2010–2014, and to 1,500 in 2015–2019. There were already 971 publications during the 2020–2021 period.

However, it should be noted that the vast majority of all those references cited by Google Scholar were not published in mainstream industrial/organizational or consulting-psychology journals. Many of the cited references were doctoral dissertations, master's theses, technical reports, white papers, conference presentations, or books and book chapters, or they were published in less

Figure 1

The Number of Publications Identified by Google Scholar That Mentioned Learning Agility Across Time



well-known journals in our field (e.g., *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *Human Systems Management*, *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, *Journal of Human Values*) or published in non-U.S. outlets (e.g., *European Journal of Training and Development*, *Journal of Korea Convergence Society*, *Personnel Review*, *Southeast Asia Psychology Journal*). In addition, the authors of the majority of those publications were affiliated with business organizations, consulting firms, or training companies. The point is not to diminish their relevance but rather to demonstrate how academic scholars—particularly in the United States—generally have not investigated the construct. More importantly, the fragmented approach to the study of learning agility has resulted in a noncohesive, incomplete understanding of the construct—one built on proprietary labels, perceived self-interests, and an absence of theory (see Dai & De Meuse, 2021; De Meuse, 2022).

Science of Learning Agility

Despite the limited attention given to learning agility by psychological scholars, many elements of the construct are supported by traditional psychological theory and research. For example, several foundational components of learning agility integrate seamlessly with experiential-learning theory (cf. Kolb, 1984). According to Kolb and Kolb (2009), there are four primary phases in the experiential-learning cycle: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. There is no beginning or endpoint in this cycle. Likewise, learning agility requires that individuals actually do something new—getting out of one's comfort zone, experimenting, making mistakes, engaging in reflection, course-correcting, learning, and growing (Anseel & Ong, 2021; McCauley & Yost, 2021). Although reading a book, watching a podcast, or discussing how to perform a new task support learning, they do not constitute learning agility. Individuals must experience the activity and behave differently.

Consistent with experiential-learning theory, there has been wide recognition since the late 1980s that much of leadership development occurs outside of formal training programs facilitated by course instructors. Rather, leaders learn most by performing novel and challenging assignments (McCall, 2004; McCauley et al., 1994; Ohlott, 2004). Such experiences often are ambiguous, involve working with and coordinating input from multiple stakeholders, and require individuals to take highly visible and risky roles. The importance of conducting after-event reviews following such experiences also is widely embraced as part of the learning process (Derue et al., 2012; Ellis & Davidi, 2005). All these learning and development findings are key components of the learning-agility construct, such as learning by doing, trying new tasks, working with others, taking risks, seeking feedback, and reflecting on one's performance. (See Harvey & De Meuse, 2021, for a summary of elements hypothesized as predisposing factors, key behaviors and strategies, and moderating environmental conditions.)

Carol Dweck's research on the "fixed" versus "growth" mind-set also aligns with the construct of learning agility (see Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Her theory posits that individuals who have a fixed mind-set believe they are born with a specific (i.e., fixed) amount of ability and it is all they ever will possess. They tend to attribute behavioral and performance mistakes to this lack of ability, which they feel powerless to change. In contrast, individuals with a growth mind-set believe performance is attained through hard work. They tend to assume mistakes stem from a lack of effort or are due to some acquirable skill that can be learned. Thus, those individuals are more likely to take risks, enthusiastically seek challenging assignments, and be receptive to feedback to improve their performance. They perceive mistakes as a natural part of the learning process that are corrected through self-insight, reflection, and perseverance. According to Dweck, individuals with a growth mind-set actively seek opportunities to learn and grow from their work and life experiences. Although Dweck's theory was proposed originally during the 1980s and is completely independent from learning agility, it only takes a short leap of faith to hypothesize that those individuals with a growth mind-set will be more learning agile than those with a fixed one.

The recent focus on mindfulness integrates directly into the learning-agility construct as well. Individuals who are mindful tend to be more aware of their environment, process information more deliberately, think logically, and perceive their experiences with greater clarity and objectivity

(Shapiro et al., 2006). Studies have shown that mindfulness is associated with more effective communication, interpersonal relationships, reflection, and resilience—all critical components of learning agility (see De Meuse, 2017b; Lee, 2021).

Perhaps the psychological research exploring how leadership behaviors and competencies need to change as individuals climb the organizational ladder most directly relates to the tenets of learning agility. Kaiser and Craig (2011) observed substantial differences in the patterns of leadership behaviors associated with success across organizational levels. In fact, they found positive predictors of success at one level actually were negative predictors at another level. Likewise, Dai et al. (2011) found that leadership competencies were significantly different as individuals ascend the various levels of management. They asserted, "To climb the organizational hierarchy, managers need to seek out new knowledge and develop new skills while at the same time abandon some approaches that used to work but no longer are effective" (p. 368). It appears clear that unless leaders continue to develop and adapt as they are promoted, they likely will derail (see Hogan et al., 2011). The findings emphasize the notion that leader success denotes the necessity of leader development, which supports and reinforces the need for learning agility.

Thus, although the construct of learning agility has not benefited much directly from the rigors of academic research, its foundational underpinnings are consistent with and supported by decades of psychological research and theory. Kurt Lewin's (1952) sage advice of nearly three quarters of a century ago has a powerful message for the advancement of learning agility today. He wrote, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (p. 160). A partnership between "users" implementing learning agility and "scientists" studying the construct would enhance its clarity, integrity, and application. It is hoped this special issue will serve as a stimulus for more scholarly research and theory, which in turn will enable talent-management professionals and leadership coaches to apply learning agility effectively.

Overview of the Special Issue

This special issue contains six articles investigating learning agility within the context of leadership, talent management, and consulting psychology. In the first article, De Meuse (2022) poses an intriguing question: Could learning agility become the g-factor of leadership? As one of the most frequently cited researchers on learning agility, De Meuse traces the twisting, incongruent paths of how learning agility has evolved. He provides a compelling summary of evidence to support the importance of learning agility to leadership potential and long-term success for navigating the leadership pipeline. Recognizing the limitations of our existing knowledge, De Meuse encourages the academic community to support further research given the high-impact role that learning agility can play when selecting and developing leaders.

Church and Seaton (2022) conclude that learning agility is—or should be—a core element of any talent-management system. Building on their decades of experience as industrial/organizational psychologists and practitioners, they discuss how learning agility has been applied to identifying high-potential talent at various career stages, developing the leadership pipeline, and building managerial-succession plans. They encourage practitioners to consider embedding learning agility into broader organizational models of leadership and as part of a multitrait multimethod approach to the assessment of potential. However, Church and Seaton also acknowledge the challenges associated with applying the concept of learning agility because of the lack of definitional consensus and depth of research.

Boyce and Boyce (2022) provide a highly pragmatic yet science-based approach to guide practitioners in the assessment of learning agility. They discuss various methods that exist for measuring learning agility—including self-report assessments, multirater surveys, interview protocols, simulations, and other alternatives—along with the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. An especially valuable component of this article is the Boyces' comprehensive set of steps—summarized in a checklist—to support practitioners when navigating the complexities of assessing learning agility.

Harvey and Valerio (2022) highlight the additional value that coaches can bring to their clients by enabling development of the metacompetency of learning agility. They describe how more deliberately coaching to develop learning agility can enhance an organization's capacity to deal with change, increase leaders' learning self-efficacy, and empower underrepresented groups. The authors emphasize that coaching for learning agility begins with assessment of both the individual leader as well as the organizational context. They provide numerous practical tactics to support coaches for helping leaders develop learning agility that are grounded in research and organized around the heuristic "agile learning process and behaviors model" (see Harvey & Prager, 2021).

Williams and Nowack (2022) remind us that, like all human behavior, learning agility is inextricably linked to how our brains are wired. They use a neuroscience lens to consolidate brain-based research applicable to learning agility. Williams and Nowack introduce neuroscience-based hacks (shortcuts) that can be deployed to enhance learning agility. These practical hacks are organized around five dimensions of learning agility: mental agility, people agility, change agility, results agility, and self-awareness.

Castiglione Andrews et al. (2022) assembled a group of experienced internal and external consultants to share case examples of applying learning agility on the "front lines" within five different organizations: Owens Corning, IBM, J. M. Huber, Lee Hecht Harrison, and an international mining company. These practitioners—Matt O'Connor, Alison Hartmann, Marilyn Buckner, Yolanda de Beer, Lianne Sipsma, and Matthew Such—help us learn from the lessons of their experiences. They address six specific questions, such as why learning agility was implemented in the organization, how senior-management buy-in was attained, and how learning agility was defined and measured, as well as what challenges emerged and how they were addressed. In many ways, this article serves as a best-practices overview of how to successfully apply learning agility in any organization.

In summary, this special issue on learning agility provides readers with a deep historical perspective on this evolving construct, a robust aggregation of existing scientific evidence, and a rich source of practical information on the effective application of learning agility. For us as guest editors, it represents a journey of probing and experimentation, perseverance and resilience, and reflection and self-discovery—not that dissimilar to the construct of learning agility itself. We hope you enjoy it!

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