



Learning Agility: The Lever Behind Enduring Leadership

Throughout a leader's career, effectiveness depends not only on intelligence, emotional capability, and experience, but on the capacity to keep learning from experience and translating that learning into better leadership.

EXECUTIVE TAKEAWAY

Learning agility is the ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply that learning in new situations. Research indicates that it is a stronger predictor of leadership performance than intelligence, emotional intelligence, or job experience. Although people differ in their natural predispositions, learning agility can be strengthened through five sets of learnable behaviors: observing, doing, connecting, thinking, and mobilizing. It is the lever that enables leaders to keep growing and also provides the developmental foundation for Leadership Change Capability.

By Veronica Schmidt Harvey, Ph.D.

[Estimated reading time: 8-9 minutes]

Most leaders reach positions of responsibility because they have learned what works. They have accumulated technical knowledge, judgment, relationships, and a repertoire of responses that have produced results.

And there is always more to learn.

A new role requires a broader perspective. A difficult conversation reveals a blind spot. A successful project provides lessons that can improve the next one. New colleagues, customers, responsibilities, and experiences continually ask leaders to expand how they think and how they lead.

This developmental need exists even in relatively stable environments. It becomes more urgent when technology, markets, organizations, or workforce expectations change quickly. In those conditions, leaders must be able to learn at the rate of change. Past experience remains valuable, but only if leaders can extract lessons from it and adapt those lessons to what the current situation requires.

Expertise helps leaders solve familiar problems. Learning agility helps them remain effective when the problem, context, or answer is new.

Why Learning Agility Matters Throughout a Career

Leadership has always required learning. Every transition, expanded responsibility, relationship, success, and setback offers information that can improve judgment and behavior. Leaders who continue learning increase the range of situations they can handle and are less likely to become constrained by the approaches that produced earlier success.

Learning agility provides a durable advantage because it is a metacompetency. It does not replace strategic thinking, communication, execution, or other leadership capabilities. It helps leaders acquire and adapt those capabilities as their responsibilities evolve. Rapid change intensifies this need because the useful life of knowledge becomes shorter. A leader who knows how to learn can keep developing even when the next required capability cannot yet be fully predicted.

A Strong Predictor of Leadership Success

Intelligence and emotional intelligence both contribute to leadership effectiveness. Intelligence helps leaders process complexity and solve problems. Emotional intelligence helps them understand and manage themselves and work effectively with other people. Job experience builds knowledge and judgment. Yet none of these qualities guarantees that a leader will continue learning from new experiences.

A meta-analysis of 20 field studies involving 4,897 leaders found substantial relationships between learning agility and both leader performance and leadership potential. The observed correlations were .47 and .48, respectively; after correction for measurement error, the estimated relationships were .74 and .75 (De Meuse, 2019). The study concluded that learning agility was a stronger predictor of leadership performance than intelligence, emotional intelligence, or job experience.

The logic is straightforward. Leadership success at one level often depends on knowledge and behaviors developed in earlier roles. Success at the next level may require leaders to release some of those familiar responses and develop new ones. Leaders derail when they continue applying yesterday's strengths without recognizing that the context has changed.

Learning-agile leaders are more likely to notice that mismatch. They seek information, learn from other people, test new approaches, examine their assumptions, and adjust their behavior. They do not avoid mistakes altogether. They are more likely to convert experience, including setbacks, into better judgment and more effective action.

IQ helps leaders understand complexity. EQ helps them understand themselves and others. Learning agility enables them to keep developing from what they encounter.

Learning Agility Is More Than Experience

Experience creates the opportunity to learn, but experience alone does not guarantee learning. Two leaders can move through the same assignment and extract very different lessons. One repeats an established approach and confirms what was already believed. The other pays attention to subtle signals, seeks perspectives that challenge an initial view, reflects on the results, and changes future behavior.

Learning agility is often defined as the ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply that learning to perform successfully in new situations. The application matters. Insight that never changes a decision or behavior has limited developmental value.

Natural Differences Are Only the Starting Point

Some people appear naturally inclined toward learning agility. Openness to experience, curiosity, cognitive flexibility, self-awareness, confidence in one's ability to improve, and tolerance for uncertainty can make learning agile behavior easier. Childhood experiences, education, and early exposure to diverse people and situations may also influence these tendencies. Leveraging assessments of learning agility can be extremely useful.

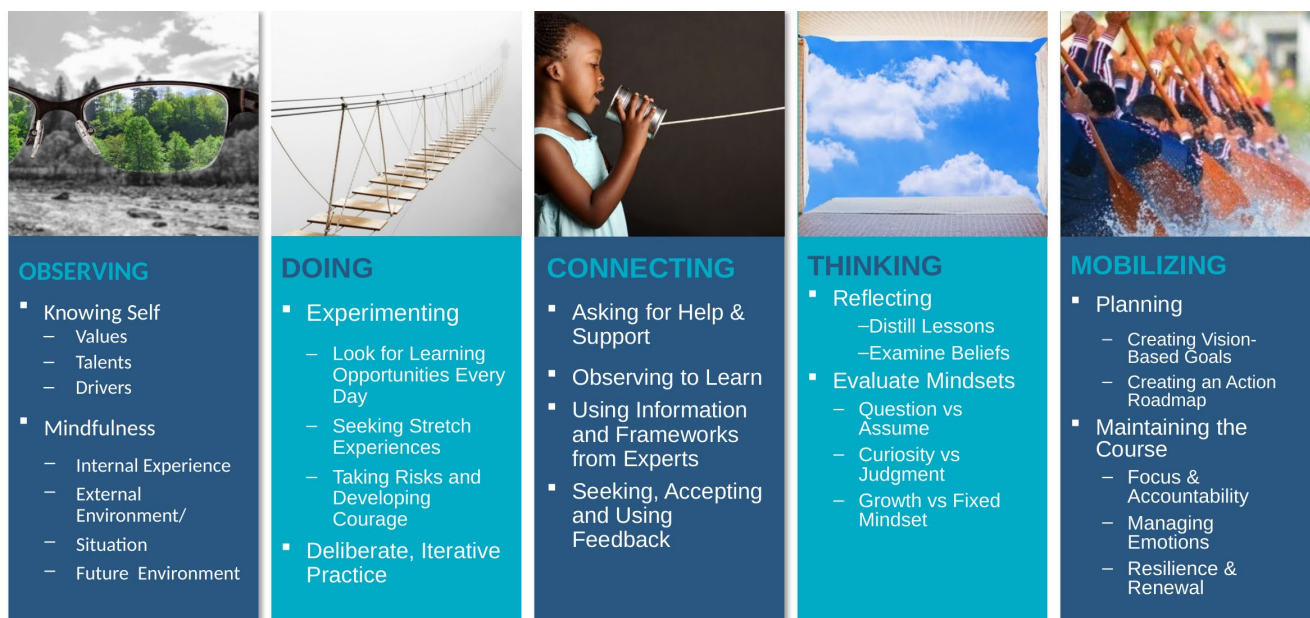
However, our learning agility starting point should not be confused with destiny. Learning agility requires behaviors and strategies that can be practiced. Natural musical ability does not make someone a pianist without learning and disciplined practice. In the same way, a favorable disposition may make learning agility easier, but it does not substitute for using feedback, reflection, experimentation, and self-regulation in real situations.

The reverse is also important. Leaders who do not initially appear highly learning agile are not permanently limited. With awareness, focus, effort, coaching, and supportive conditions, they can strengthen the behaviors that enable them to learn more effectively from experience (Harvey & De Meuse, 2021).

Learning Agility Can Be Developed

A practical approach to development begins by making the process visible. Harvey and Prager (2021) organized learning agile behavior into five broad categories: Observing, Doing, Connecting, Thinking, and Mobilizing. Harvey and Valerio (2022) later applied the same model to coaching. The categories are a developmental framework rather than a rigid sequence. They overlap, reinforce one another, and can be used at different points in the learning process.

FIGURE 1 | THE AGILE LEARNING TOOLKIT



Source: Schmidt Harvey Consulting; adapted from Harvey and Prager (2021) and Harvey and Valerio (2022).

Five Learning Agile Behaviors

1 Observing



Observing means paying close attention to internal and external reality. It includes mindful awareness, environmental scanning, future forecasting, and an honest view of personal strengths and gaps. Leaders strengthen this capacity when they slow down long enough to notice what is changing before they decide what to do.

2 Doing



Doing turns learning into experience. It includes experimenting, seeking stretch opportunities, finding new information and frameworks, taking appropriate risks, and deliberately practicing unfamiliar behaviors. Large assignments can be developmental, but leaders can also create small experiments inside everyday work.

3 Connecting



Connecting recognizes that learning is social. Leaders accelerate development by asking for help, observing role models, using coaches and mentors, and seeking feedback from people with different experiences and perspectives. These behaviors require curiosity, listening, and enough vulnerability to admit that another person may see something we do not.

4 Thinking



Thinking converts activity into insight. It includes reflection, questioning, curiosity, a learning mindset, and the ability to examine the beliefs and assumptions shaping a response. Reflection is most useful when it moves beyond replaying an event and identifies a lesson that can guide future action.

5 Mobilizing



Mobilizing turns intention into sustained behavior. It includes setting learning goals, creating an action plan, focusing effort, managing emotions, and balancing discipline with renewal. Without mobilizing, reflection and feedback may produce insight without lasting change.

Learning agility can also be overused. Curiosity and experimentation become counterproductive when leaders pursue novelty or change for its own sake. Effective learning agility remains anchored in purpose, evidence, and what the situation requires. Sometimes the most learning-agile response is to retain what is already working.

Experience becomes development when leaders notice more, try something new, learn with others, make meaning, and convert insight into action.

Learning Agility and Change Capability

Learning agility and Change Capability are closely connected, but they describe different levels of leadership effectiveness. Learning agility is the developmental capacity that enables a leader to recognize changing demands, challenge habitual responses, learn from experience, and adapt. Leadership Change Capability is the leader's capacity to translate that learning into the roles and responses the organization needs as conditions evolve.

In the Leadership Change Capability framework leaders flex among five complementary roles: Navigator, Learning Guide, Pilot, Engineer, and Stabilizer. Learning agility helps a leader recognize when a familiar role no longer fits, learn a less comfortable response, and shift intentionally. Those responses then strengthen the organization's broader capacity to anticipate change, learn, mobilize people, redesign systems, and sustain performance. For a fuller discussion of the framework, see Harvey (2026).

The relationship works in both directions. Change exposes leaders to novelty, complexity, and feedback that can accelerate learning. Learning agility helps leaders use those experiences well. As their repertoire grows, they become better equipped to build Leadership Change Capability in themselves and greater Organizational Change Capability around them.

Learning agility is the developmental engine. Change-capable leadership is how that learning is expressed when the organization needs to adapt.

The Leadership Development Opportunity

Learning agility can be developed without waiting for a promotion, an international assignment, or a crisis. Most leaders already encounter a steady stream of experiences that can become developmental: difficult conversations, unfamiliar stakeholders, new technology, customer feedback, missed targets, successful experiments, and decisions made with incomplete information.

The opportunity is to approach these experiences deliberately. Leaders can identify what they need to learn, choose a behavior to practice, gather feedback, reflect on the result, and make a course correction. Coaches and managers can accelerate the process by helping leaders see patterns, surface assumptions, design experiments, and remain accountable for applying what they learn. An assessment specifically designed to measure learning agility can be useful in identifying the learning-agile behaviors that may be more or less challenging.

Organizations also shape whether learning agility grows or stalls. Psychological safety, assessing learning agility, candid feedback, access to diverse perspectives, fair distribution of stretch experiences, and recognition for learning all matter. A culture cannot credibly claim to value learning agility if people are punished for asking questions, admitting mistakes, or testing thoughtful new approaches.

Where to Begin

Leaders do not need to strengthen all five behavior sets at once. A useful starting point is to identify which part of the learning process most often breaks down. Some leaders act quickly but do not observe carefully. Others reflect deeply but do not experiment. Some gather extensive input but struggle to convert it into focused action.

Select one current leadership challenge and ask five questions:

- Observing: What is changing, and what does this situation require from me?
- Doing: What can I try or practice rather than merely analyze?
- Connecting: Whose experience, feedback, or perspective would improve my understanding?

- Thinking: Which belief or assumption should I examine?
- Mobilizing: What specific action will I take, and how will I sustain it?

Why This Matters

Organizations cannot predict every disruption or define every leadership capability that will be needed in the years ahead. They can, however, develop leaders who know how to learn when familiar answers stop working.

That is the enduring value of learning agility. It enables leaders to keep expanding their repertoire, apply experience in new ways, and change how they lead as the situation changes. In an age of continuous disruption, the capacity to learn may be the most renewable leadership advantage an individual or organization can build.

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*Veronica is a recognized thought leader in learning agility and change capability. She is co-editor of *The Age of Agility: Building Learning Agile Leaders and Organizations* (Oxford University Press, 2021) and has co-edited special issues of *Consulting Psychology Journal* focused on the science and practice of learning agility and, most recently, building change capability in turbulent times.*

She is also currently contributing a book chapter, "Coaching to Develop Change Capability," extending this work into practical approaches for developing leaders' capacity to navigate and lead through change. Her work integrates research with extensive practical experience to help leaders strengthen their ability to learn, adapt, and lead effectively through ongoing change.