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Learning Agility in the Age of Uncertainty

Understanding the critical need for learning agile leadership in an increasingly uncertain world.

Thought Leadership

Social instability. Trade Wars. The COVID-19 pandemic. The year 2020 will certainly be marked in history.

Yet, although textbooks may recall those extraordinary events, what most people will remember from the year is their experience coping with disrupted life and work routines. Where once a working day had clear start and end times, now the boundary between personal and professional lives has blurred. Where once casual office chatter had built relationships, now connections are forged across the digital divide, while adjusting for time and geographical differences.

Undoubtedly, we are living in an age of uncertainty—and unpredictability. Business leaders are facing entirely new and different situations they couldn't imagine 10 years ago. And the pace of change is only accelerating, which means many of the management techniques leaders have used in the past may not work anymore today.

Think of the phrase "MBWA"—or "managing by walking around." MBWA was a management technique to stay in touch with team members and be available to lend support. But in this increasingly digitalized and flexible working environment, people manage by walking around their house with earbuds.

All of this is the perfect opportunity to flex our *Learning Agility*.

About the 'Learning Agility' series

In 2000, Learning Agility *was introduced to the field of leadership and talent management. Ten years later, colleagues from Korn Ferry declared once again that the time for* Learning Agility *had come. Now, fast forward another 10 years, as organizations operate in an age of unrest and uncertainty,* Learning Agility *has become more relevant to leadership than ever before.*

The critical need for 'Learning Agility'

To be effective under these conditions, leaders have to stay in tune with how the world's evolving. There is demand for the ability to be nimble and adaptable because of this speed of disruption. *Learning Agility* is central to this adaptability.

This is because leaders who are highly learning agile are more flexible and better able to adapt their behaviors as situations change. And given today's dynamic, hyperchanging environment, a premium has been placed on *Learning Agility* as an essential and indispensable quality for both leaders and high-potential talent.

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In a world increasingly in flux, *Learning Agility* has become more crucial than ever before—a reality reinforced by two recent studies by the Korn Ferry Institute. Leaders have to learn new skills in order to adapt, because in today's business environment, they can no longer play the ball game they used to in the past. Those who are learning agile will thrive, beating tomorrow's competition.

Leading constant transformation

In early 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, Korn Ferry interviewed over 100 CEOs in North America. The objective of this research was to investigate how leaders see business evolving, what challenges both businesses and leaders face, and what leadership skills and capabilities are needed for future CEOs. The interview participants cited several megatrends that are having—and will continue to have—widespread, disruptive impact on organizations. In order to succeed in this environment, companies will have to constantly transform and reshape their organizations.

Against this backdrop, the CEOs were asked to identify distinguishing characteristics that future CEOs would need to demonstrate in order to succeed. They laid down an extensive list of skills and capabilities, including tech-savviness, risk-taking, authenticity, humility, resilience, emotional intelligence, being driven by purpose, and open communication. Without a doubt, these qualities are equally important for future leaders, but there is one that topped the list: a growth mindset.

More than half (56%) of the interview participants stressed the importance of continuous learning and development for CEOs, now and in the future. "If the world's going to change every three to four years, so do the executives," said the CEO of a restaurant and hotel chain. "Your future success is

going to depend on a different ball game, different skill sets, and a different approach."

Given this rapidly changing environment, business leaders will need to reinvent themselves both as individuals and leaders of organizations in order to thrive. This capability requires these CEOs to be learning agile—constantly learning and willing to consider things they may not know or understand, as well as embrace those things that may not be traditional and familiar. They have to be insatiable learners, driven to continually educate themselves.

As one board member of a Fortune 100 pharmaceutical firm said, "*Learning Agility* is going to be more important going into the future, not just to have intellectual fire power, but the ability to learn, adapt, and really be aware in many different kinds of situations."

This is echoed by a CEO of a leisure and hospitality company. "I don't see how you can do this without being highly learning agile, because a lot of the things that you're going to face don't have a roadmap," the leader said when interviewed by Korn Ferry. "So, experience and different skillsets that have been developed are really important, but *Learning Agility* is critical because you're going to have to change."

Leadership through turbulent times

In early May, Korn Ferry launched a global survey to investigate how organizations are reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the questions asked by the firm was: "How do you anticipate that leadership roles will change in the new environment?"

Over 350 leaders from more than 55 countries responded to the survey. They represented a wide range of industries, including high tech, consumer

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goods, financial services, life science, healthcare, retail, manufacturing, and financial services.

Three clear themes emerged from the survey results: structural change, empowerment, and agility. To many respondents, the COVID-19 outbreak will have a deep impact on both organizations and leadership, with some kinds of consolidation to occur. Of the participants, roughly 10% said that the organizational structure will become flatter, while around 14% responded that leadership will become less hierarchical due to COVID-19's impact on business.

In the view of the survey respondents, leaders will become less directional and controlling in the post-pandemic world, and instead, become more empowering, delegating more to their workforce. Survey participants believed that, in the future, leaders will enable employees to make decisions and take action.

Furthermore, about 13% of participants explicitly described the demand for agile leadership. They underscored the importance of leaders being nimble, open to change and new thinking, willing to take risks, comfortable with ambiguity, showing flexibility, and able to adapt quickly. Other leadership qualities participants cited include collaboration (7.1%), communication (5.1%), empathy (4.2%) fast decision making (4%), and accountability (3.4%).

Future-Proof Your Leadership with 'Learning Agility'

In chemistry, homogenization is the process by which things are made uniform or similar. In management, this means companies imitating high-performing peers—and competitors—to ensure best practices are in place.

Managers move between organizations, bringing with them their past experiences and tried-and-true methods. As a result, the similarity between firms grows, whether they are within the same industry or not.

But to thrive in the current environment, organizations and leadership will need to fight this homogenization of business. After all, companies and their leaders are only as good as their last success. Future leaders, then, need to be self-disruptive so they can ADAPT. In fact, the most effective leaders don't just benchmark—they do the same things, but better than the others. They don't seek to imitate.

When Netflix started its business, its leaders didn't pursue the best practices of talent management at that time. Instead, they reinvented human resources in a way that helped them win the war for talent. Now, Netflix's approach to talent management has become the best practice for their competitors to imitate.

Learning Agility is central to becoming a self-disruptive leader who can adapt and thrive in new, ambiguous, uncertain situations—a relationship between *Learning Agility* and leadership adaptability that has been well-established by scientific research. *Learning Agility* helps get people into new and challenging situations. Challenging situations, in turn, develop people's resilience and adaptability.

In an age when the word "unprecedented" is ubiquitous, Learning Agility is at the core of building leaders' adaptive strength—which can mean the difference between surviving the future and thriving in it.

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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We help clients synchronize strategy and talent to drive superior performance. We work with organizations to design their structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people to bring their strategy to life. And we advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their people.