

Proof Point

What's Smarter than IQ?

Learning Agility. It's No.1 – above intelligence and education – in predicting leadership success.

by Kenneth P. De Meuse

The concept:

Learning agility is the willingness and ability to learn from experience and apply those lessons to perform well in new and challenging situations.

Used to:

Identify high-potentials and specify development plans for up-and-coming leaders. Also can be used to assess external candidates for leadership positions.

Measured with:

viaEDGE™, a new psychometrically developed self-assessment.

Important because:

It's the leading predictor of success in leadership roles. It is also somewhat rare: it's estimated that only about 15 percent of the workforce is highly learning agile. Learning agility also provides developmental due diligence by identifying and supporting the development of high potentials.

You may have heard of the Peter Principle. It has been around for more than 50 years. It asserts that employees will continue to get promoted until they reach their highest level of incompetence. Today's workplace has ushered in a new principle; one that is much more insidious. I call it the Paul Principle. The Paul Principle states that employees don't need to get promoted to become incompetent. They will become incompetent in their current jobs if they don't grow, adapt, and evolve.

This is why *learning agility* is the most important quality to look for in a business leader today. Certainly all jobs are becoming more complex, more ambiguous and more technologically demanding, but it is even more true for organizational leaders. Unless managers and executives continue to learn new competencies and behaviors, they risk going the way of inkwells, 8-tracks, and typewriters.

In a nutshell, learning agility is the willingness and ability to learn from experience and then apply those lessons to succeed in new situations. Leaders who are learning agile continuously seek new challenges, solicit direct feedback, self-reflect, and get jobs done resourcefully.

They see unique patterns and make fresh connections that others overlook.

Learning agility is a vital indicator of high potential talent. A 2011 Korn/Ferry study of sales managers bears this out: The higher an individual's learning agility, the more promotions he or she received during a 10-year period.

Similarly, longitudinal studies conducted at AT&T, Sears, and Pepsi observed that managers who modified their behaviors, exhibited flexibility, and accepted mistakes as part of learning new competencies were more successful than their counterparts as they climbed the corporate ladder. The most rigorous

research was conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership and summarized in a book aptly titled, *Lessons of Experience*. After interviewing roughly 200 executives, the authors discovered that the most successful executives were able to move out of their comfort zone, take risks, learn from mistakes, and begin anew as they encountered new assignments. Their technical and functional expertise, which were valued at lower levels, gave way to building teams, inspiring confidence, and developing strategic goals. Bottom-line: the successful leaders continually learned, bent, and flexed as their work world changed. In other words, they were *learning agile*.

This is why learning agility has become the No. 1 predictor of leadership success today, more accurate than IQ, EQ (emotional intelligence), education level, or even leadership competencies.

Objectively identifying managers with high levels of learning agility has tremendous value for organizations. Before putting time, energy, and money into developing an executive, an organization can confirm if he or she truly is the right investment. They can also avoid an egregious mistake in overlooking a nondescript employee who really is a high potential talent.

Most learning agility assessments use multiple people—supervisors, peers, direct reports—to rate each individual after seeing him or her in action. Although such measures

Five factors of learning agility

Korn/Ferry's new self-assessment viaEDGE™ provides scores on:

- > **Mental agility** — ability to examine problems in unique and unusual ways
- > **Self-Awareness** — extent to which an individual knows his or her true strengths and weaknesses



- > **People agility** — skilled communicator who can work with diverse types of people
- > **Change agility** — likes to experiment and comfortable with change
- > **Results agility** — delivers results in challenging first-time situations

can be very useful, they need to meet many conditions. For example, the raters must work from a common frame of reference, so harsh or lenient ratings give way to realistic (accurate) ones. When several employees are evaluated at once, rater fatigue can become a factor. A multi-rater approach likewise does not work for hiring external job candidates; one can't really ask the current employer to provide ratings so that another company can make a good hiring decision.

To address such concerns Korn/Ferry has recently developed viaEDGE™, a self-assessment that measures learning agility from a multi-dimensional perspective. In addition to one's overall learning agility, five different facets are assessed: (a) mental agility, (b) people agility, (c) change agility, (d) results agility, and (e) self-awareness. Such a multi-pronged approach enables organizations to not only identify the most highly agile individuals, but to diagnose agility weaknesses and find appropriate developmental opportunities.

A common concern about self-assessments is their accuracy. What prevents people from simply inflating their scores? viaEDGE™ has several verification scales embedded to confirm the scores are accurate. In addition, there is an indicator to evaluate the extent to which an individual unduly presents a socially desirable image. Overall, it provides a calibrated, scientifically derived measure of an individual's learning agility.

Learning agility is the cornerstone of effective leadership today. Identifying and developing those leaders who possess it is the best way for organizations of any size to optimize their talent pipeline. Talent decisions are too important to be based on gut feelings or chance.

About the Author

Kenneth P. De Meuse is the vice president for global research at Korn/Ferry International Leadership and Talent Consulting. He has published five books and multiple journal articles on leadership development and talent management. He received his doctorate in industrial/organizational psychology at the University of Tennessee.

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