

# AGILE LEARNING

By George S. Hallenbeck Jr. and Kim E. Ruyle

**When Richard Branson started Virgin** as a recording company in 1970, it is unlikely that even he foresaw the direction his company would take.

Had the company remained in its original niche, Virgin would probably have closed its doors years ago. But Branson's remarkable versatility has kept Virgin going. He reinvented the company as an airline in the 1990s and then again five years ago as a mobile telephone company. Earlier this year, Virgin received a full banking license from the British government.

Branson possesses a strength that is in surprisingly short supply in executive suites: he is "learning agile," that is, he is able not only to adapt to but also to take advantage of significant changes. Learning agility, the lubricant for performing well in periods of great change, will be in increasing demand in coming years. The business world is hurtling forward at an unprecedented pace, with globalization, demographic shifts and cultural conflicts making the world an extremely volatile place. Executives who can adapt to these massive shifts will thrive. Managers who rely on the same bag of tricks, on the other hand, will eventually find themselves outmaneuvered.

Our research indicates there are 27 traits, like tolerance for ambiguity and a sense of perspective, that are facets of learning agility. We can reliably measure managers' learning agility by assessing to what degree they possess these traits. Surprisingly, our studies show that despite its importance to corporate performance, true learning agility is just as rare among top executives as in the general population. No more than 20 percent of top executives are what we define as agile learners. Since learning agility is necessary for becoming a great leader, the number is worrisomely small.

Why are there so few learning-agile executives? To begin with, most companies do not do a very good job of identifying this special breed. Beyond seeming to require a baseline intelligence (agile learners tend to be above the bottom third in intelligence), learning agility is not linked to I.Q. Rather, it is associated with hard-to-pinpoint traits like an eagerness to tinker.

Even if agile learners can be identified, many will not be promoted. Corporations tend to rely on hard performance

figures rather than the vaguer notion of "potential," in which learning agility plays a big role. Good numbers in the form of sales or productivity usually lead to a step up the ladder. Good people skills may not. Then there is the problem of momentum. CEOs who are not agile learners themselves tend to shun people who are; the masters of adaptability can be seen as high maintenance individuals who are always trying to stir things up. And if agile learners are not nurtured throughout their career, they are very likely to jump ship.

Sometimes, those who seem to be agile learners are not. Consider the case of one manager at a big multinational corporation whose lack of adaptability set him — and the subsidiary he led — up for failure. For more than two decades, this executive had been considered a high-potential manager. He had proved himself capable in a wide variety of functions, including engineering, sales and customer services. When his corporation purchased a small, entrepreneurial business with 4,000 employees, this promising executive was put in charge.

Things quickly began to unravel. The executive insisted on following the corporate practices of the large multinational he had grown used to even though the culture of the newly purchased subsidiary had been very different — more entrepreneurial and less centralized. The staff became mutinous and the executive was soon forced out. His employers were left with a rocky integration and his career was sidetracked.

The behavior of this ill-fated manager is all too easy to understand. Humans are creatures of habit because it would take too much effort to have to reinvent the way we do things all the time. If our behaviors have brought us past successes, we have all the more motivation to stay the course. Yet often that is the wrong thing to do, as the executive coach Marshall Goldsmith outlined in his book, "What Got You Here Won't Get You There." New situations require new ways of doing things. And, failure can be even more perilously habit-forming than success. When faced with adversity, people also tend to fall back on the comfort of old habits.

Fortunately, we can train ourselves and other leaders in our companies to become agile learners. Our research shows that flexibility is substantially innate. But learning agility is

also partly an acquired capability. Perhaps nothing serves as a better teacher, in this department, than adversity and discomfort. Often, it is the job you do not want to take that yields the biggest chance to improve learning agility. We call these assignments “GAG,” for going against the grain.

Irene Rosenfeld, CEO of Kraft Foods Inc., encountered her GAG assignment when she was asked to become president of the company’s Canadian operation in the late 1990s. Rosenfeld was not eager to make the move. All of her direct reports were men and were, in Rosenfeld’s words, “not wild” about Americans. She set out to prove that an American woman could understand Canadian consumers. Rosenfeld turned Kraft’s business around in that country. In 2006, she was appointed CEO of the entire company.

Some of the most important GAG opportunities may come from overseas assignments, which is not surprising since living with people from different cultures forces us to see the world in a different way. Living abroad gets us off the conveyor belt and makes us question the smallest things, like what we eat for breakfast and how to greet colleagues. PepsiCo is one company that has successfully used global experience to foster learning agility in its key executives, creating a deep talent pool that has eased succession issues.

Corporations can coast along for years, even decades, without agile learners at the top. Adaptability is not useful in a static environment. Once change does come, though, executives’ inability to adapt can cause things to go very wrong, very quickly. Consider, for instance, the rapid implosion of the United States textile and steel industries. Korn/Ferry International is often called upon to help companies confront-

ing massive change; many times, a company’s board says it wants to bring in a new CEO who will “shake things up.” Yet executives’ willingness to inflict change on others, but not on themselves, cannot be confused with real learning agility, which is necessary for sustaining a business in the long run.

“Executives who look like masters of change are sometimes following a script,” said Robert Eichinger, former CEO of Lominger International, a Korn/Ferry International company that specializes in leadership consulting. “They are capable of tough action like cutting staff and closing branches, but they basically do the same things all the time. They are good to have around for a few years, but then you need to bring in someone who has true learning agility.”

Some managers seem remarkably versatile, and their curiosity and courage spill over into their personal lives. The correlation between learning agility in nonwork situations and the work environment is unclear. Yet it bears noting that Bill Gates is interested in everything from medicine to education. And, Branson’s escapades on yachts and hot air balloons are famous.

We also know people who are set in their ways — the uncle who tells the same jokes every holiday and insists on the same dishes prepared in the same way year after year. The trick for corporations is to make sure it is the agile learners — and not the set-in-their-ways uncles — who make their way to the top. 

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