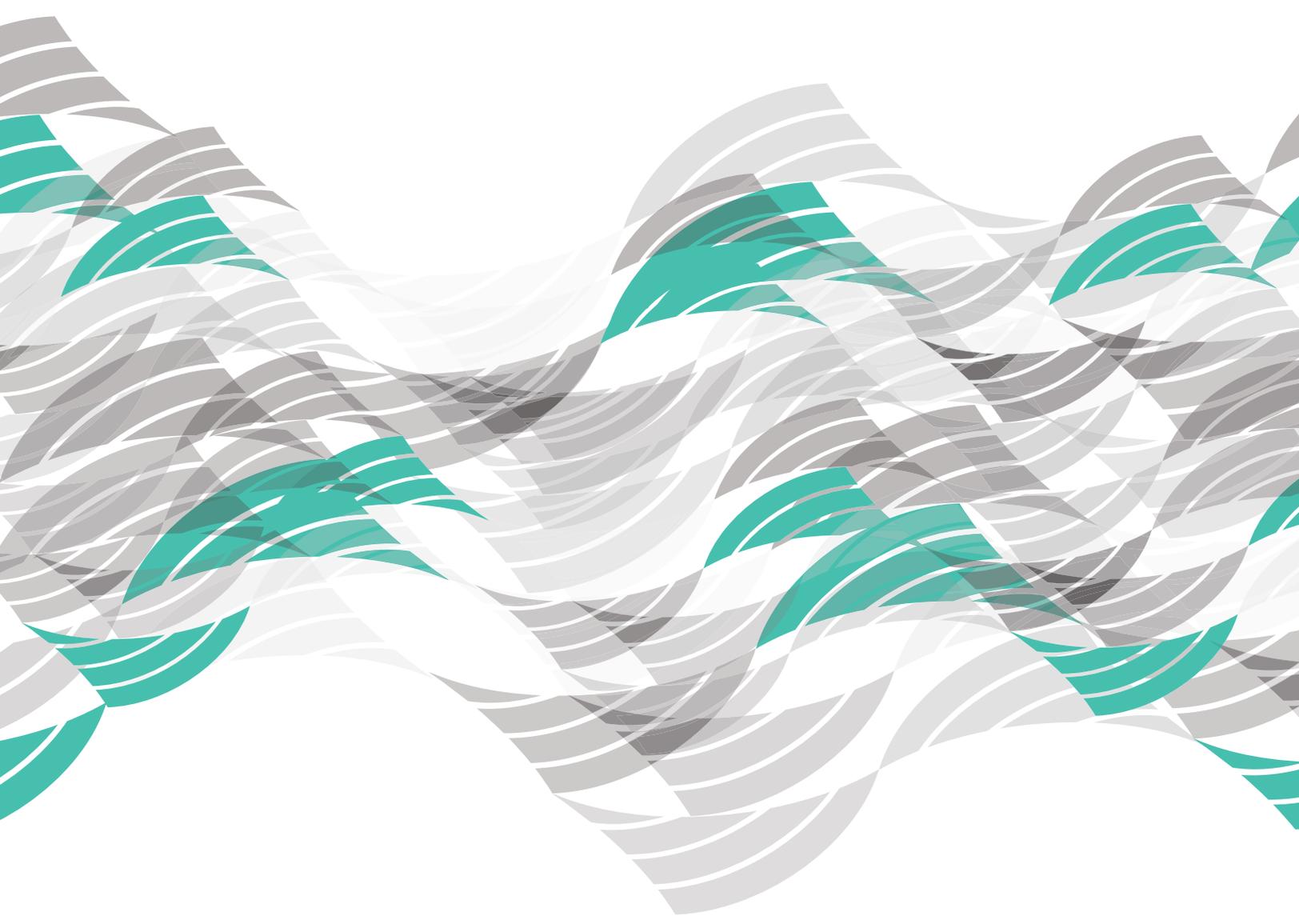


WHITE PAPER

Learning About Learning Agility

By: Adam Mitchinson and Robert Morris





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Introduction

In times of change, leaders need to be more agile than ever. Adapting to new business strategies, working across cultures, dealing with temporary virtual teams, and taking on new assignments all demand that leaders be flexible and agile. But what does being “agile” mean? Are some leaders better

at this than others and, if so, how did they get to be that way? Researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) and Teachers College, Columbia University investigated these questions resulting in some important conclusions for leaders who wish to thrive in today’s turbulent times.

What You Will Learn from This Paper:

- Innovating:** They are not afraid to challenge the status quo.
- Performing:** They remain calm in the face of difficulty.
- Reflecting:** They take time to reflect on their experiences.
- Risking:** They purposefully put themselves in challenging situations.
- Defending:** They are simply open to learning and resist the temptation to become defensive in the face of adversity.

Of these five facets of learning agility, leaders consistently report risk-taking to be the hardest to enact within their organizations.

Learning-agile individuals tend to be more social, creative, focused, and resilient. They are less interested in accommodating others and are not afraid to challenge norms.

Learning-agile behaviors matter to others; managers seem to value those who are less defensive and who are open to feedback; peers and direct reports appear to value those who are more reflective and willing to change.

What is Learning Agility?

An essential leadership attribute is the ability to remain open to new ways of thinking and to continuously learn new skills. **We have long known that a major difference between successful people and those whose careers falter is their ability to make meaning from their experiences.** CCL research shows us that leaders who refuse to let go of entrenched patterns of behavior or who do not recognize the nuances in different situations tend to derail, whereas successful leaders continue to develop on the job. We now know that these successful leaders are learning agile; that is, they show the willingness and ability to learn throughout their careers, if not their entire lives.

This understanding has created a revolution in terms of how we view leadership potential. In the past, we have tried to predict an individual's potential for future success based exclusively on past performance and demonstrated skills and abilities. However, this approach is inherently flawed. Research shows that fundamentally different behaviors are required across organizational levels and that the behaviors that are effective at one level do not necessarily lead to success at the next. Moreover, the rate of change within organizations is greater than ever; thus, leaders are constantly required to adapt. When discussing the issue of long-term potential then, an individual's current skill-set is of secondary importance to their ability to learn new knowledge, skills, and behaviors that will equip them to respond to future challenges. **As a result, our focus must shift to finding and developing individuals who are continually able to give up skills, perspectives, and ideas that are no longer relevant, and learn new ones that are.**

Although our understanding of learning agility is growing (see the Further Reading section for examples), research is still in its infancy and there is much work to be done. **It is imperative that we continue to evolve our understanding of the concept and seek better clarity around what learning agility is, how it can be measured, and what learning-agile individuals do that differentiates them from others.** Ultimately, this work will help practitioners better assess, select, and develop high-potential talent within their organizations. And through a better understanding of learning-agile behavior, individuals can unleash their own leadership potential.

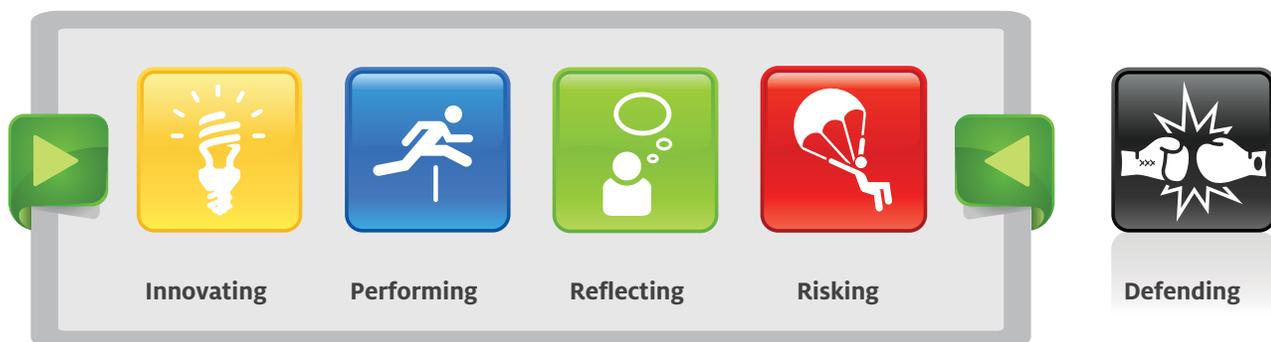
Researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University, have been working for two years on the Learning Agility Initiative (LAI) with the mission to increase understanding of how learning-agile individuals behave at work. The current collaboration with the Center for Creative Leadership is a subset of this broader initiative.

Exploring the Learning Agility Assessment Inventory

Our research supports the view that learning agility is a mind-set and corresponding collection of practices that allow leaders to continually develop, grow, and utilize new strategies that will equip them for the increasingly complex problems they face in their organizations.

The research team at Teachers College, Columbia University, has developed the Learning Agility

Assessment Inventory (LAAI) to measure what we believe to be the five main facets of learning-agile behavior. Of these five facets, there are four that enable one's learning agility (Innovating, Performing, Reflecting, and Risking) and one that frustrates or impedes it (Defending). A brief description of each facet follows.



Learning Agility “Enablers”



Innovating

The first component of learning agility involves questioning the status quo and challenging long-held assumptions with a goal to discover new and unique ways of doing things. This requires one to have new experiences, which provide perspective and an opportunity to grow one's knowledge base of understanding. High learning-agile individuals generate new ideas through their ability to view issues from multiple angles.



Performing

Learning from experience occurs most often when we are overcoming an unfamiliar challenge. However, in order to learn from such challenges, an individual needs to be able to remain present and engaged, handling the stress brought on by ambiguity and ultimately adapting quickly in order to perform. This requires keen observation and listening skills, as well as the ability to process data quickly. Doing so enables high learning-agile people to pick up new skills more quickly and perform better than their less agile colleagues.



Reflecting

Simply having new experiences does not guarantee that one learns from those experiences, and learning-agile individuals seem to know this. They are hungry for feedback and spend focused energy processing information so as to better understand their own assumptions and behavior. They generate deeper insight into themselves, others, and problems as a result.



Risking

Another core component of learning agility involves venturing into unknown territory and putting oneself “out there” to try new things. Learning-agile individuals are pioneers—adventurous and comfortable with progressive risk—risk that leads to opportunity, not thrill-seeking. They volunteer for jobs and roles where success is not always guaranteed, and in fact, where failure is a possibility. Learning-agile individuals learn continuously and amass confidence by stretching themselves outside their comfort zone, resulting in a cycle of perpetual success.

Learning Agility “Derailer”

CCL has long been interested in behaviors that cause individuals not to be promoted or stall out for long periods in their careers. We call these behaviors “derailers.” When it comes to learning agility, one such derailer is avoiding learning opportunities when they arise.



Defending

Being open to experience is fundamental to learning. It is no surprise then that we found that individuals who remain closed or defensive when challenged or given critical feedback tend to be lower in learning agility. High learning-agile individuals seek feedback, process it, and adapt themselves based on their newfound understanding of themselves, situations, and problems. We included this in our measure because highly successful people tend to gain confidence from their successes, but they also risk closing down to outside feedback as a result. To guard against this inadvertent destructive behavior, defensiveness needs to be measured and understood alongside the positive behaviors associated with learning agility.

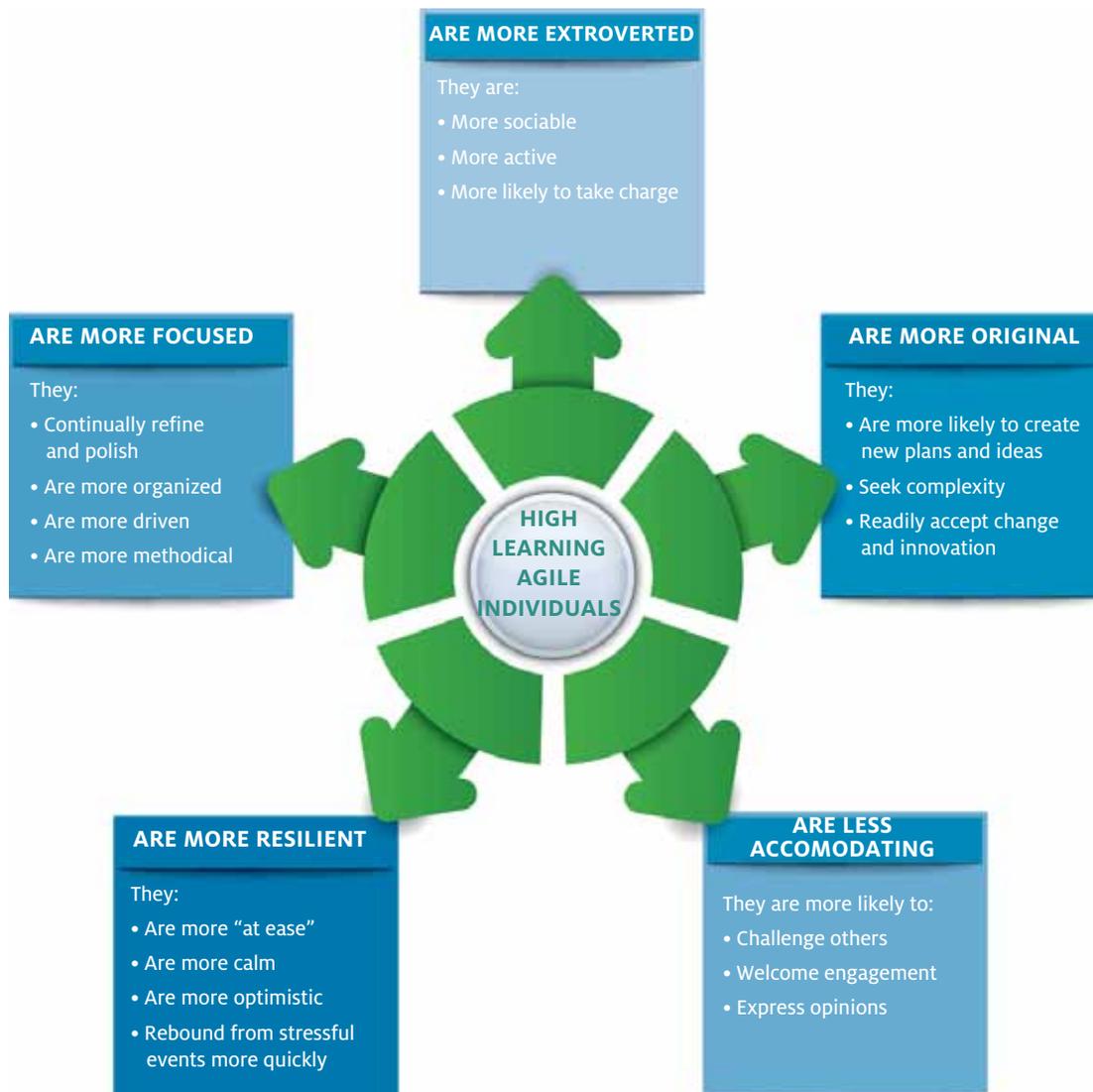
Each of these facets provides insight into the type of behaviors and actions that individuals high in learning agility employ. Learning-agile individuals seek opportunities for growth and are able to process these opportunities in order to learn. They are open to new experiences, seek challenges, and are willing to introduce new ideas and question “norms.” Moreover, they are able to remain present in challenging situations, performing, and adapting “on the fly.” **Finally, learning-agile individuals understand that experience alone does not guarantee learning; they take time to reflect, seeking to understand why things happen, in addition to what happened.**

It is important to acknowledge that although each of these facets is important, it is not likely (or perhaps even desirable) that a person can exhibit all of them simultaneously. However, we believe that individuals must possess each of these components in their repertoire in order to be considered learning agile.

Learning Agility at Work

Part of the broader Learning Agility Initiative, conducted in collaboration with CCL, is concerned with understanding how high learning-agile individuals behave at work. One way we did this was to compare how individual responses on a number of established psychological assessments compared to responses on the Learning Agility Assessment Inventory (LAAI).

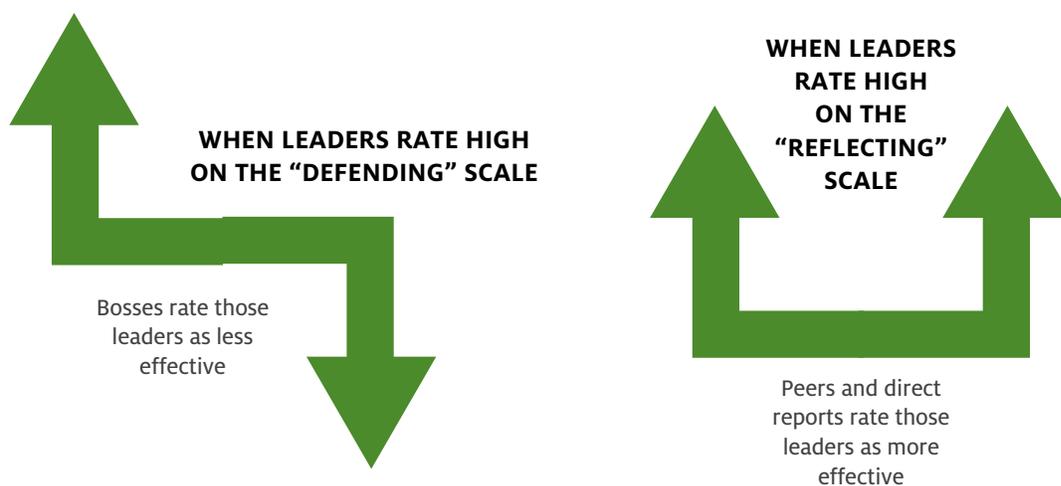
In line with previous research, we have found no significant differences in learning agility scores across gender, age, or organizational level. However, in exploring the relationship between leaders' scores on the LAAI and the WorkPlace Big Five Profile™ personality assessment, we have begun to see how learning-agile individuals may show up at work differently than the rest of the population. High learning-agile individuals (i.e. individuals who score highly on the four Learning Enabler dimensions and low on the one Learning Derailer dimension) are more likely to have the following traits:



Our research suggests that there are certain behaviors that high learning-agile individuals commonly employ. While these behaviors may be easier for some due to personality, it is important to note that we believe that anyone, with sufficient effortful practice, can employ them. Our results suggest that high learning-agile individuals are very active organizational members—they are sociable and active, create new plans and ideas, are methodical perfectionists, and are not afraid to challenge others or express opinions. In addition, learning-agile individuals seem to be more resilient, generally calmer and “at ease” than their less agile counterparts, suggesting that learning-agile individuals not only seek out new and challenging situations that may serve as learning experiences, but

also manage these challenges effectively, allowing learning to occur. **Putting yourself in a challenging environment is one thing, but being able to cope with the stress of that challenge is another.** This latter component of learning agility will likely be harder for some to develop, but individuals must find a way to do so in order to be considered learning agile and to be effective in their leadership roles.

An examination of 360-degree feedback scores for the leaders we studied indicated that learning agility also has an impact on how leaders are perceived by others. Put simply, our data suggest that defensive behavior is related to how we are evaluated by our managers, while reflective behavior can affect how we are evaluated by our peers and direct reports.



We found a relationship between individuals’ self-ratings of defensiveness and their managers’ ratings of their effectiveness. **Specifically, defensive individuals were more likely to be rated as less effective by their managers on a number of competencies, including self-awareness, communication, ability to respond to complexity, ability to adapt, and ability to meet business objectives.** We found a similar relationship in the ratings of peers and direct reports for whom reflective behavior was particularly important. Peers and direct reports were more likely to rate highly reflective individuals as more effective on competencies such as responding to complexity, implementing change, managing teams, and managing interpersonal relationships as compared to less reflective individuals.



These findings make sense when considering the interactions between an individual's manager, subordinates, and peers. Part of a manager's role is to delegate tasks, monitor progress, and evaluate performance. At times, managers need to give feedback on task accomplishment and advice on how to perform more efficiently and/or effectively. This is especially true in situations where performance is not as expected. Managers will likely be finely attuned to defensive behavior when providing feedback and advice to their subordinates. Therefore, it is easy to see how the ability to remain open to feedback and avoid making excuses for performance will significantly influence the nature of the manager-subordinate relationship.

On the other hand, fundamentally different relationships exist between an individual's peers and direct reports. These stakeholder groups are less likely to feel authorized to provide formalized feedback about performance. However, these groups do have a keen interest in their colleagues' performance, both in terms of contribution to the overall work product and the management of others. Thus, peers and direct reports are likely to provide feedback in the way of softer nudges or suggestions. Furthermore, these groups will likely be more sensitive to our ability to reflect, seek feedback, and learn from mistakes. **Each of these behaviors not only shows a willingness to learn on our part, but also a degree of humility—a capacity invaluable to all managers.**

Tips and Suggestions for Becoming More Learning Agile

Learning agility is increasingly important in a fast-changing world. If you are interested in becoming a more learning-agile leader, here are some tips that may help.

First, you'll need to assess your current level of learning agility on each of the five dimensions in order to identify which areas offer the greatest opportunity for personal growth.

Do I ...

INNOVATE 	Challenge the status quo in an attempt to make improvements?	OR	Try to achieve the best with what I have at my disposal?
	Experiment with new ideas and endeavor to find the best solution to each individual problem?	OR	Choose the most readily available solution and move on to the next challenge?
PERFORM 	Pick up on subtle cues to build a better understanding of the problem?	OR	Trust my intuition to guide me to a solution?
	Stay calm when faced with a challenge or stressful situation?	OR	Use stress as energy to get things done more quickly?
REFLECT 	Make time to critically reflect on my experiences?	OR	Move quickly from one task to another in order to accomplish more?
	Examine past failures for lessons?	OR	Put failure quickly behind me in order to focus on the next challenge?
TAKE RISKS 	Volunteer for roles that are ambiguous, new, or otherwise challenging?	OR	Take on challenges where I know I can be successful?
	Take enjoyment from struggling with a challenging problem?	OR	Take enjoyment from managing a well-oiled machine?
DEFEND 	Consider my personal role in both successes and failures?	OR	Take credit for success and quickly make excuses for failure?
	Seek feedback because I need it?	OR	Listen to feedback because others want to give it?

When you read the above statements, which side of the line seems to describe you better? If you identify with the statements on the left, you may already embody many of the components of learning agility. If you fall on the right, there may be room for improvement where learning is concerned. In either case, consider trying some of the development activities and personal challenges on the next page to improve your own personal learning agility.



DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES
AND PERSONAL CHALLENGES

WHY IS THIS
IMPORTANT?

INNOVATE



- For each problem you face, challenge yourself to come up with new solutions, even if seemingly tried and trusted ones exist.
- Make brainstorming new ideas a habit—the less traditional, the better.
- When faced with a challenge, ask yourself two questions:
 1. What is holding me back from trying something new and different?
 2. If these constraints were not in place, how would I approach this situation differently?

We often choose the first solution to come to mind rather than taking time to consider whether it is truly the optimal course over the long term. This is especially true in high-stress environments. By trying out new approaches, we can uncover ways of doing things that could save time and energy over time and surface new learning that may otherwise have not been considered.

PERFORM



- When faced with something new, look for similarities between the situation and things you have done in the past. Draw on these similarities to frame the new challenge.
- Ask questions to understand, not to be understood. Really listen to what others are saying and trust that you will have a response when they have finished talking.
- When you find yourself feeling stressed, pause. Don't just say or do the first thing that comes to your head—take a moment to consider what is really required.

When we are under pressure, we can feel the urge to get things done quickly. Ironically, consciously searching our mind for ideas and solutions closes us off to both the wisdom of others and our own experience. Inspiration often comes from the unconscious; being open to this can spark new ideas that we may have otherwise never had.

	DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AND PERSONAL CHALLENGES	WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?
<p>REFLECT</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find someone who you trust to give you open and honest feedback and challenge that person to do so. Show that you are open to the process by only asking clarifying questions. Resist the temptation to explain your actions or make excuses. • Conduct After Action Reviews where you, and relevant others, reflect on recent projects by asking three questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What happened? 2. Why did it happen that way? 3. What should we stop/start/continue doing in order to ensure success in the future? 	<p>In our busy work lives where there is always something to do next, it can be difficult to find the time to stop and look back. Learning occurs when we take the time to shift our thinking beyond merely what happened to ask ourselves why things happened the way they did. Finding ways to accomplish this, both alone and with others, is essential to learn from experience.</p>
<p>TAKE RISKS</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take on a new challenge that scares you; find something that is meaningful but not so important that failure will have serious personal consequences. Most importantly, tell others what you are doing—ask for their help and support. 	<p>Performance matters. But too often we focus on short-term performance at the expense of personal development. Even our greatest strengths can become problematic when overused. Taking on new challenges allows us to stretch beyond our comfort zone and develop new skills and perspectives that may become an important part of our repertoire in the future.</p>
<p>DEFEND</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View feedback as a gift that someone is giving you. You may not like it and it may be uncomfortable, but there is value in it nonetheless. Regardless of the other party's motivations for giving you feedback, there is always the opportunity to learn something about yourself that you previously did not know. • Resist the temptation to respond to feedback, especially at first. Try not to explain your actions to the other person or generate excuses in your own head. Always try to thank the other person. 	<p>Receiving feedback can often feel threatening, like an attack on who we are. When this is the case, our instinct is to deflect the comments, perhaps by making a joke or by attacking the person in return. However, when we enter a mode of self-preservation and try to defend what is, we close ourselves off to what could be. It is only in the latter, not the former, that we are able to learn and grow.</p>

Learning Agility in Action

Becoming more learning agile can be an important addition to any successful leader's repertoire. Here's an example of how one individual going through executive coaching at Columbia University became more learning agile and has become a better leader as a result.

Sarah's Story

Sarah is a facility manager for a large multinational accountancy firm. She, along with her team of five direct reports, is responsible for all operational aspects of one of the firm's national headquarters. Sarah's role is tremendously varied; no two days are the same as she continuously attends to any number of discrete, independent tasks.

Sarah is consistently viewed by her superiors to be a high performer. However, in her most recent performance review, Sarah's manager highlighted a number of areas where he believed Sarah could improve. Specifically, the manager commented on how he believed that in order for Sarah to become more effective, she needed to be better at finding synergies across the multitude of tasks that she and her team performed. The manager believed that while Sarah was very good at her job, she didn't seem to be building capability in her team, to the point that he worried what would happen if Sarah left or was out sick.

At first, Sarah didn't pay too much attention to these comments. She was performing well and, in her mind, that was all that mattered. Sarah believed that her manager didn't truly understand the demands of her role and that, in her own words:

“He didn't know what it's like to be putting out fires all day every day.”

Sarah was speaking figuratively, even though part of her role was actually to oversee the fire evacuation plan for the entire building. She saw her role as “doing what needed to be done—no more, no less.”

Over the course of a number of conversations with Sarah, it became clear that she approached each task as if it were new. In Sarah's mind, no two tasks were ever exactly the same and as a result each day was met with a fresh perspective. This was obviously proving to be successful for Sarah in some areas; she had built a team that was extremely nimble, innovative, and constantly open to trying new ways of doing things. However, this

orientation was clearly being overused. Sarah's team had few documented procedures beyond those required by law and she didn't have the confidence in her team to “remember what to do.” She found it very difficult to take a vacation.

Sarah and her team were in a constant mode of re-learning. Sarah prided herself on being in the trenches with her team and had an “all hands on deck” mentality. However, because of this, Sarah never took the time to take stock of the team's activities and how they were being accomplished; she was unable to see obvious parallels and synergies between activities.

In time, Sarah discovered that her drive to be in a constant state of action prevented her from stopping and thinking about how she approached her role and led her team. She came to realize that she had actually received the same feedback in other roles and in other jobs but had never taken it on board, always justifying that her role was about “doing, not thinking.” In the language of the LAAI, it was clear that while Sarah was a strong innovator and risk-taker, she rarely took time to reflect and had the tendency to be defensive when given feedback from others.

This insight helped Sarah change the way she approached her role and ultimately the way she led her team. Sarah has tried to take a more holistic view on her team's activities and be more open to how they are perceived by important organizational stakeholders. As a result, Sarah has been able to institute a number of important projects, including one to document reoccurring processes and procedures and another to gather feedback from the team's primary clients in the facility. These two projects alone have given her team the ability to institutionalize their role knowledge and allowed them to take a more strategic and planned approach to their work. Ultimately, Sarah believes this insight has allowed her to take on a more effective leadership role within her organization and she is expecting to be promoted to the position of regional operations manager in the near future.

Conclusion

It is clear that learning agility is part of any successful leader's repertoire. The willingness and ability to learn from experience influences not only the extent to which we grow as individuals, but also how we are perceived by others. **Ultimately, our ability to continuously learn and adapt will determine the extent to which we thrive in today's turbulent times.**

We can all endeavor to be more learning agile. We can take more risks and challenge the status quo, all while ensuring we are both present in the moment and reflective after the fact. Finally, we need to try to do all of this while resisting the temptation to become defensive in the face of criticism or other challenges.

The extent to which we are able to do this will have an impact not only on who we are today, but also on who we can become tomorrow. We will always face new challenges, problems, and issues. What separates the once successful, from the still successful is the ability to meet these challenges head-on and take these lessons forward.

About the Research

Purpose

Over the past two years, researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University, have conducted studies to theoretically and practically ground the concept of learning agility. Through expert interviews, reviews of the adult learning and leadership literatures, and numerous field studies, five essential learning-agility dimensions have been identified. These five dimensions have formed the basis of the Learning Agility Assessment Inventory (LAAI), a 29-item survey that measures learning-agile behavior. To develop this instrument further, a research project was conducted with the Center for Creative Leadership to:

1. Explore how the LAAI performs within a workplace setting
2. Better understand how learning agility, as measured by the LAAI, relates to other important psychological constructs (e.g., personality)
3. Explore how individuals practice learning-agile behaviors at work

Who participated in the research?

During a four-month period in the spring of 2011, participants in four CCL development programs¹ were invited to complete the LAAI on computer kiosks located at CCL. Using CCL's Ideas2Action research process, participants were asked to think about how they typically handle challenging situations at work and respond to 29 items that measure the five facets of Learning Agility. Over the four-month period, 134 respondents completed the inventory. These responses were collated to create a learning-agility profile for each respondent and these profiles were then confidentially linked to two other CCL measures: a 360-degree assessment instrument and the WorkPlace Big Five Profile™ personality assessment. Collectively, these data allowed the team to analyze how a business audience responds to the LAAI and begin to explore the relationships between learning agility and other important workplace predictors of performance. On the next page is a summary of the sample upon which portions of this white paper were based.

Figure 1: Gender

GENDER	IN-CLASS PERCENTAGE
Male	47%
Female	22%
Not Identified	31%

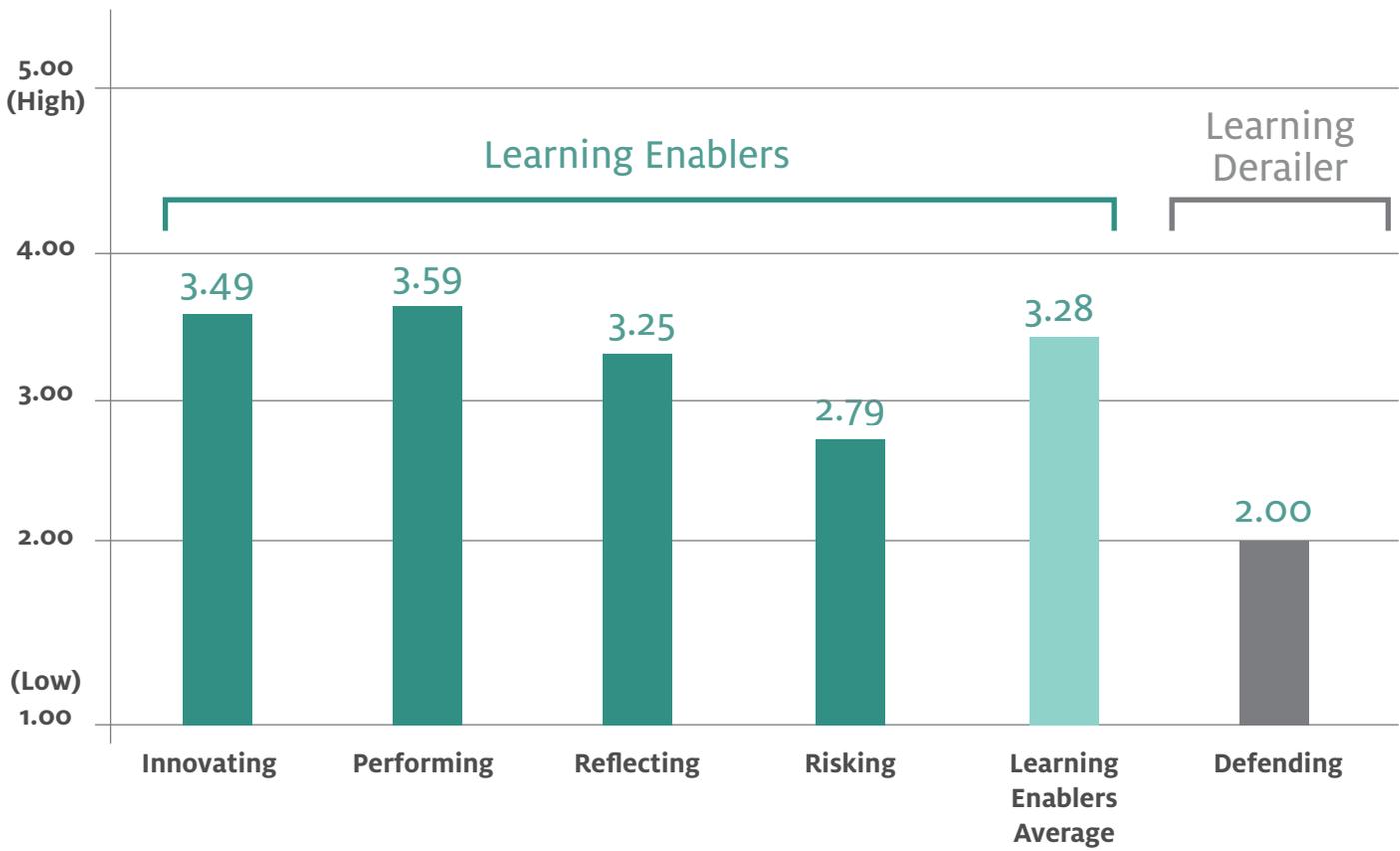
Figure 2: Age

AGE	IN-CLASS PERCENTAGE
26-30	2%
31-35	12%
36-40	10%
41-45	16%
46-50	16%
51-55	7%
56-60	5%
61+	2%
Not Identified	31%

Figure 3: Level in Organization

LEVEL IN ORGANIZATION	IN-CLASS PERCENTAGE
First Level	4%
Middle Management	17%
Upper Middle Management	25%
Executive	14%
Top Management	4%
Not Identified	39%

Figure 4: Average Facet Ratings on the Learning Agility Profile



Further Reading and Resources

¹ Programs: Developing the Strategic Leader, Leadership Development Program, Leading for Organizational Impact, and Maximizing your Leadership Potential

De Meuse, K. P., Dai, G., & Hollenbeck, G. S. (2010). Learning agility: A construct whose time has come. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62(2), 119-130.

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McCall, M. W., Jr. (1998). *High flyers: Developing the next generation of leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Nadler, D. A. (2007), The CEO's 2nd act, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 85 1, January, pp. 66-72.



About the Authors

Adam Mitchinson is currently pursuing his PhD in social-organizational psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he also received his master's degree in the same field. In addition to the project outlined in this paper, Adam is actively involved in research on understanding paradox in leadership, specifically how leaders can embody both behavioral flexibility and authenticity in stressful work environments. Adam also does consulting work specializing in individual, group, and organizational assessment and development.

Robert Morris, PhD, earned his PhD in social-organizational psychology from Teachers College, Columbia University, and is a former member of W. Warner Burke's Doctoral Research Group. He is passionate about improving leader selection and development practices, and he has been actively involved in this field for the past six years. Dr. Morris is currently the general manager of YSC, New York, a business psychology consultancy specializing in leader assessment and executive development.

Contributors

W. Warner Burke, PhD & Doctoral Research Group

Dr. Burke's workgroup conducts action research in organizational settings in an attempt to produce relevant and rigorous studies in the areas of leadership and organization change. This paper is the product of a larger research initiative being undertaken by this group. Current group members include Adam Mitchinson, Bradford Smith, Kate Roloff, and Nathan Gerard.

Phillip Braddy, PhD, is a Psychometrician at CCL. He develops and validates CCL's assessment instruments and conducts research on a variety of topics related to leadership. Phillip has received multiple awards and recognitions for his research, and his articles have been published in numerous peer-reviewed journals, including the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Leadership Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*. Phillip holds a PhD in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from North Carolina State University.

Michael Campbell, a CCL Portfolio Manager, is lead researcher on CCL's initiative to examine talent and succession management in a global context and CCL's senior executive research initiative, which focuses on understanding the challenges and leadership needs of those at the most senior levels. He also manages CCL's Ideas2Action (I2A) project developing fresh research content for the practicing leader. Michael holds a BS in Business and an MA in Communication from the University of Colorado.

William Pasmore, PhD, is an international authority on organizational leadership. Bill joined CCL in 2008 as organizational practice leader, guiding efforts to help clients develop the larger organizational leadership systems that increase their overall performance and enable their leaders to thrive. He was a partner for 11 years in the corporate learning and organizational development practice of consulting firm Oliver Wyman Delta. He holds a BS in Aeronautical Engineering/Industrial Management and a PhD in Administrative Sciences from Purdue University in Indiana.



The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of leadership development. By leveraging the power of leadership to drive results that matter most to clients, CCL transforms individual leaders, teams, organizations, and society. Our array of cutting-edge solutions is steeped in extensive research and experience gained from working with hundreds of thousands of leaders at all levels. Ranked among the world's Top 10 providers of executive education by *Bloomberg Businessweek* and the *Financial Times*, CCL has offices in Greensboro, NC; Colorado Springs, CO; San Diego, CA; Brussels, Belgium; Moscow, Russia; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Johannesburg, South Africa; Singapore; Gurgaon, India; and Shanghai, China.

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