HOW TO CULTIVATE LEARNING AGILITY
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Organizations need leaders with learning agility in order to move ahead successfully in volatile times. But can you teach someone to be a more agile learner? We say yes and have identified the elements that will help someone increase learning agility. Explore our proven practices, and see how leading organizations are making it happen.

BY MARY ANNE AMATO AND DALIA MOLOKHIA

In the late 1990s, the U.S. military coined the term “VUCA” to describe the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous landscapes in which today’s soldiers must operate. More recently, the corporate world has latched onto the term as an apt description of the challenges companies face as they compete in a business environment characterized by constant, rapid, and unpredictable evolution.

We know that many leaders doubt their abilities to cope with these complex challenges. CEOs surveyed by The Conference Board expressed concern about their ability to handle an array of VUCA-related issues, including economic depression in Europe, currency volatility, financial instability in China, labor relations, cybersecurity, and energy market volatility.

This lack of confidence stems from a mismatch between the way we typically promote leaders and the unprecedented complexity those leaders face at lower and lower levels within organizations. Most of our promotion criteria are based on past performance rather than on whether leaders possess the skills needed to achieve success. We need leaders who are not only accomplished but are also agile learners.

In PwC’s 18th Annual Global CEO Survey in 2015, the CEOs interviewed stressed the “soft” skills of leadership. They spoke of the need for vision and for agility and flexibility in decision making. They also highlighted the importance of being curious about their business world. As Russia-based Alfa Bank CEO Alexey Marey said, “If you don’t know how to learn, you won’t survive.”

“The ability to learn is a defining characteristic of being human; the ability to continue learning is an essential skill of leadership. When leaders lose that ability, they inevitably falter. When any of us lose that ability, we no longer grow.”

WARREN G. BENNIS AND ROBERT J. THOMAS, GEEKS AND GEEZERS: HOW ERA, VALUES, AND DEFINING MOMENTS SHAPE LEADERS
What Is Learning Agility?
At Harvard Business Publishing, we have identified eight key leadership capabilities that any leader must have in order to successfully lead his or her business to success in today’s VUCA operating environment.

Learning agility is one of the most important of these capabilities. We believe it has three essential components.

1. **Potential to Learn**
   Learning requires an open and receptive mind-set. Through years of experience, we often gain expertise and competence, but we may become myopic in our inability to see different, potentially better ways to improve processes or even reach new goals.

2. **Motivation to Learn**
   Changing ingrained behaviors and long-held habits is hard work. To the extent that organizations can make learning more enjoyable, they can stimulate the learning agility of their employees.

3. **Adaptability to Learn**
   Rather than simply following a business-as-usual routine, employees with adaptability to learn consistently reflect on the effectiveness of their skills. This helps determine whether they need to develop certain competencies and find new ways to improve efficiency and get better results.

Leaders with the potential, motivation, and adaptability to learn can quickly and accurately analyze problems, synthesize information, and comprehend complexity. They have the curiosity to actively seek out new opportunities and challenges and are flexible in their approach to problem solving. These leaders are willing, able, and eager to test assumptions and search for lessons learned in order to improve their ability to cope with the next challenge down the road. These are the leaders your organization needs in order to succeed in a VUCA environment.

Despite the fact that most experts agree on the importance of learning agility, many organizations struggle to cultivate learning agility among their employees. Rather than compartmentalizing learning agility and trying to develop it on its own, we believe you get the best results by weaving it throughout your entire learning and development programs.
Cultivating Agile Learners

Harvard Business Publishing regularly works with complex organizations to foster learning agility in their workforces. Learners come to the table with different innate levels of learning ability, but we believe everyone can become a more agile learner with the right learning interventions.

To better understand how people can become more agile learners, consider each of the three factors that contribute to learning agility—potential to learn, motivation to learn, and adaptability to learn. Within each of these areas, we’ll explore ways that organizations can help their employees boost learning agility.

The specific competencies that make someone successful in a certain role today might not be sufficient tomorrow.

To become agile learners, we must change the lens through which we view situations. Instead of reacting to challenges and opportunities with the same fixed set of responses, we must take the time to reflect on the circumstances and try to think independently and creatively to come up with new solutions. Companies can facilitate this “mindset shift” by encouraging leaders to:

- Review and discuss inspirational and/or cautionary case studies
- Identify, build, and assess arguments for or against specific plans of action
- Critically evaluate arguments (not just opposing arguments, but even their own suggestions) for inconsistencies and errors
- Solve problems using a systematic, rational, and logical approach
- Justify the relevance and importance of their own ideas, beliefs, and values
- Seek out others with different perspectives (whether business role, generation, or culture) to gather input before making a decision

Organizations have a responsibility to improve their employees’ potential to learn through practices such as coaching and shadowing. Coaches should ask questions that help leaders see a different way to approach problems and find new solutions. Job shadowing pairs employees with one another (either peer with peer or junior with senior) so that they can each learn from one another. By enabling employees to immerse themselves briefly in another part of the company, job shadowing shows learners a new perspective—“changing the lens” through which they perceive their own role in the organization. This will give them an appreciation for the contributions different business units make to reaching overall strategic goals.

Stretch assignments and job rotation can also be valuable development tools to help employees boost their learning potential. Used correctly, these assignments serve the dual purpose of giving employees a chance to learn while simultaneously advancing a project that has benefits for the organization. Employees who leave their comfort zone and take risks to get results derive a major confidence boost when they succeed in stretch assignments.
motivation TO LEARN

Learners need to be engaged and inspired by the learning process for learning to take hold. Experiences with high interest and urgency can increase motivation to learn.

Gamification is one effective tactic that companies can use to motivate employees to learn. We know from both from experience and research that learners are more motivated to participate in development programs that include elements of game playing such as point scoring, rules of play, and competition with colleagues. Deloitte Leadership Academy has seen an almost 37 percent increase in users each week since integrating gamification—just one example of the success that can be achieved with this technique.

You can look for ways to link gamification more tightly with learning. Consider implementing an action learning project that incorporates contests or competitions in which learners solve real problems facing the business.

Today, successful companies need innovative employees who challenge the status quo and examine established assumptions from new perspectives. Organizations can foster such innovation by encouraging employees to look at the big strategic picture: what goals are we trying to reach, and what is the best way to achieve those goals? By making employees feel more invested in the success of the company and by showing them how their contributions factor into the success of the whole enterprise, organizations can motivate their employees to be more innovative and more agile learners.

In an interview with *Harvard Business Review*, Jeff Dyer, Horace Beesley Professor of Strategy at the Marriott School at Brigham Young University, suggested creating a culture of innovation by setting up processes that encourage people to question and give them time to observe customers and other companies. For example, Google and Procter & Gamble organized an employee swap. For about two months, their marketing and HR employees worked at the other organization to see how they did things. Once their tour was completed, they brought those ideas back to their respective companies. Networking offers another opportunity to increase motivation to learn. Provide employees with opportunities to go to conferences or facilitate in-house meetings with outside talent.

“Becoming more learning-agile will help you cope with the turbulence of the workplace. And it will make you more aware of how to bring out the potential in your learning-agile people.”

“IMPROVE YOUR ABILITY TO LEARN,” *HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW*, 2015
Agile learners are proactive; they look for opportunities to learn and experiment with new approaches.

Rather than simply following a business-as-usual routine, employees with adaptability to learn consistently reflect on the effectiveness of their skills. This helps determine whether they need to develop certain competencies and find new ways to improve efficiency and get better results.

Building the adaptability to learn may seem onerous at first, but there are ways we can be intentional about it. Not every employee will face the same set of challenges or work under the same set of VUCA conditions. We can help our employees critically assess their current situation as well as the environments in which they may be interested for the future.

Reflection, especially in the planning stages, can help people devise approaches to cope with complexities with which they are not yet familiar. Reflection can also be used to spur thinking around new approaches or to determine ways to obtain feedback. Further, examining our feedback processes and feedback culture may lead to insights on how to encourage more feedback seeking and learning within our organizations. According to Kenneth DeMeuse, Guangrong Dai, and George Hallenbeck, “People who are highly learning agile continuously seek out new challenges, actively seek feedback from others to grow and develop, tend to

Fiat Chrysler Automobiles

At Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA), people are challenged to be accountable, both as individuals and as a group, for their own development. That means taking learning in their own hands to address challenges based on real business issues.

According to Ruggero Cesaria, FCA EMEA Training Committee coordinator, “FCA recognized the need to change the way we learn, because the ‘old’ way of learning was based on general theory separated from actual application on the job. It would have taken us years to fill in the gap.” The company introduced a new way of learning that placed accountability within the business, providing opportunities to practice problem solving in real-life scenarios.

The “Learning to Get Results” program model is designed to truly show an individual’s potential to learn and to demonstrate his or her focus on continuous learning, problem-solving capabilities, and teamwork. A 24/7 “coopetive” game gives learners the opportunity to stretch. The ability to balance competition and cooperation is becoming more important to success. The game leaves each player and each team to make calls: Should I play as an individual or as a team member? Is everyone making a contribution? Are they trustworthy and generous? Individuals can decide to join or leave a team, and the team can even dismiss a team member. They gain firsthand experience in a key role, handling issues of “social capital” in addition to personal “knowledge capital.” The full learning cycle exposes employees to rich experiences while providing ongoing support such as coaching, mentoring, communities, and feedback.
Deloitte

Deloitte has adapted to the VUCA operating environment by adopting a strengths-based development culture. The idea behind this shift is simple—even as business circumstances change or employees advance from one role to the next, employees carry with them their unique strengths and apply them in individualized ways to get the desired results the company needs.

The “NextGen Experience” exemplifies Deloitte’s focus on potential to learn. NextGen participants are selected based on a strong track record of performance, high potential for leadership, and demonstrated commitment to developing themselves and others. The experience includes self-reflection, assessment, and coaching as critical inputs to a leader’s development plan. The development plan includes challenging assignments designed to stretch leaders to apply their strengths in roles they have not otherwise been exposed to and to deliver results. The accumulation of these experiences ensures leaders are prepared to step in and apply their strengths successfully in a variety of firm leader roles.

Deloitte also uses simulations at the core of its development programs for newly promoted professionals. In these transition acceleration programs, newly promoted professionals are immersed in a VUCA environment and asked to navigate a week’s worth of challenges compressed into a two-day time frame. Points of self and team reflection are peppered throughout the experience to promote learning transfer. Reflection questions focus on:

- What did I do/observe?
- What went well?
- What didn’t go so well?
- How will I take what I’ve learned and apply it successfully on the job?

This discipline is intended to boost learning agility by improving participants’ adaptability to learn.

Recognizing people’s innate desire to “do good” on a societal basis, Deloitte launched a unique program, Wicked Problems, that taps directly into employees’ motivation to learn.

Wicked Problem participants are exposed to a social issue (e.g., health and wellness, bullying) and asked to apply empathy-based problem-solving techniques to generate innovative ways to address these vexing problems. The experience provides a platform for employees to learn more about social issues they are passionate about that are far removed from their daily work routines, all the while adding to their problem-solving toolkit for application in their day-to-day work.
reflect on their actions, and evaluate their experiences to draw practical conclusions.

**Looking Ahead**

Organizations can strengthen the learning agility of their current and future leaders by using some of these ideas to motivate their leaders to learn, help them become more adaptable, and accomplish the mindset shift needed to see challenges through a new lens.

Every single person has different innate learning abilities, but organizations have the capability and indeed the responsibility to help their leaders achieve their full potential by channeling their energy into proper development, commitment, and practice.

As you prepare your leaders for the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business landscape, consider how this VUCA atmosphere exists inside the walls of your company.

- Are there pockets of your organization that work extremely well under inherently high-VUCA environments?
- What can you learn from those pockets that you can bring to the others in terms of training your leaders to manage in a volatile situation without letting the workplace itself become chaotic?
- How will you meet your responsibility to create and foster an environment where people can reflect, experiment, and grow?

Finally, consider the words of futurist Alvin Toffler, who said, “The illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read. It will be the person who does not know how to learn.”

Is your company rising to the challenge of making sure all your leaders know how to keep learning to cope with whatever paradigm shifts lie ahead?

“The question is not whether your company’s employees and leaders have the right skills; it’s whether they have the potential to learn new ones.”

*Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, Harvard Business Review, 2014*
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