

WHITE PAPER

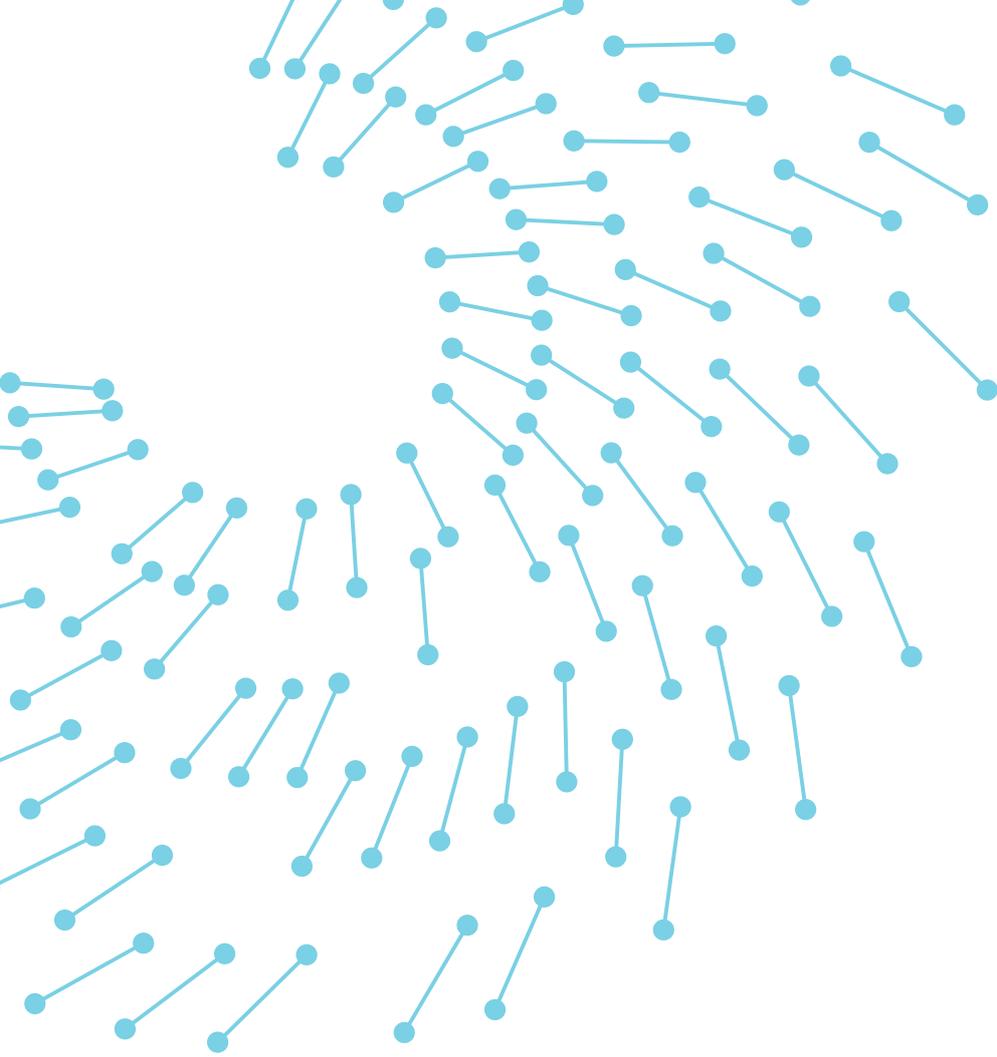
Great Leaders Are Great Learners

How to Develop Learning-Agile High Potentials



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Executive Summary

While learning agility has become a hot topic in recent decades, there's not yet widespread understanding of its underlying nature, nor the best way for organizations and talent development leaders to leverage it, especially because it isn't a skill that's necessarily concentrated at the top of your organization. Instead, it's likely dispersed among leaders at all levels. And it's often overlooked. By learning how to identify and cultivate learning agility, your organization can create more confident leaders who are ready for the future, who are able to proactively identify business opportunities, and who can quickly respond to unexpected challenges.

This white paper offers CCL's perspective on 3 of the most fundamental and frequent questions about learning agility:

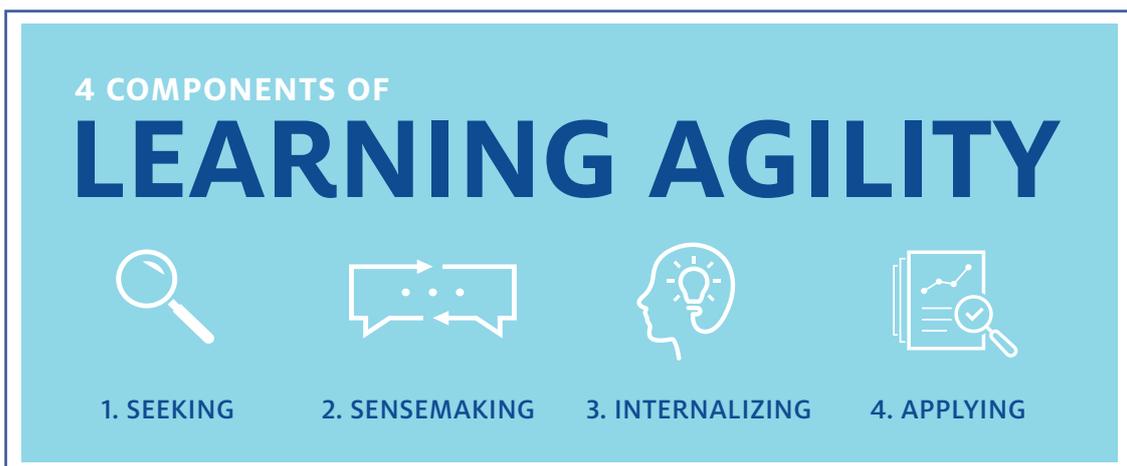
- *What is learning agility, and who possesses it?*
- *How do I identify learning agility in my organization's leaders?*
- *How do I develop learning agility in myself and my organization's leaders?*

Importantly, we'll outline the difference between high potentials and high professionals, 2 classes of highly coveted employees that organizations often conflate. By properly identifying the distinctions between these groups of talented employees, your organization can maximize its workforce, putting people in the right roles, and helping you better design and implement a leadership strategy.



What's Learning Agility?

Learning agility is the ability to know what to do when you don't know what to do. That probably captures its essence better than any formal definition, but to put learning agility in more specific terms, it involves the practice of 4 specific and interrelated sets of behaviors that allow people to learn deeply from their experiences and then apply the lessons they've learned when faced with new and challenging circumstances.



For learning agile individuals, their practice of these behaviors is often an “unconscious competence”—they merely “do what they do” when faced with new challenges and are more likely to identify as “lifelong learners” or “works in progress” rather than “learning agile.” Likewise, in the eyes of others, learning agile people are often characterized as “quick studies” or for having a “knack” for coming up with new solutions. Because of their penchant for succeeding in circumstances that are unfamiliar for both them and their organizations, individuals who are learning agile are often seen as also having high potential.



Let's dive deeper into the 4 sets of behaviors:

- **Seeking:** Developing learning agility requires an intentional willingness to immerse yourself in new and challenging situations that broaden and expand your experiences. Learning agile individuals see these situations as prime opportunities for new learning and growth. Furthermore, these are seen as opportunities to seek out and embrace, not just to accept.
- **Sensemaking:** Learning from experience is a highly active and ongoing process marked by curiosity and a willingness to experiment. Asking “Why?” “How?” and “Why not?” are essential to gaining the insight and perspective that fuels learning. Failed experiments, and the setbacks and criticism that accompany them, are just a part of the ongoing journey for learning agile individuals.
- **Internalizing:** Learning doesn't end with the experience. Seeking feedback and taking time to reflect are critical for deepening insight and embedding critical lessons for future recall and application. They also strengthen self-awareness, which is essential for dealing with future challenges in a realistic manner and staying open to new learning.
- **Applying:** A lesson isn't truly learned until it's applied. Learning agile individuals excel at adaptive learning—accessing principles and rules of thumb from previous experiences and applying them to navigate new and challenging situations. Swiftly adapting to new circumstances based on an understanding of what has (and hasn't) worked in other situations is at the heart of what distinguishes learning agile individuals.



Who is Learning Agile? How to Identify Learning Agility in Your Talent

Good news—your organization is already filled with people who possess learning agility. But if you don't know what to look for, it can be difficult to identify.

Learning agility is what's often referred to as a “normally distributed” skill, meaning that in any given population, you'll see a bell curve of people with mostly moderate capability while a smaller segment of the population resides at the extremes of having a larger or smaller amount. Therefore, the people who really excel at learning agility—and therefore can step up to the challenging and urgent issues your organization must address—are relatively few.

To complicate matters, there are no demographics pertaining to age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, experience, or other major characteristics that would differentiate who is and isn't learning agile. In other words, looking across the organization, it could be just about anyone.

There are some valid tools on the market that can tell you with some accuracy whether or not someone may be learning agile. Those measurements can certainly help to refine your search, but you shouldn't solely depend on them. From our experience, learning agility is best understood and identified by direct observation, followed by a bit of intuition and then using measurement as a finishing touch.

To spot learning agility, begin by really understanding what differentiates people with this skill, and focus on what they do when faced with new opportunities for learning.



The Difference Between High Professionals and High Potentials

Organizations looking to identify their learning agile talent are prone to assuming they've already selected these employees as part of a "top talent" pool or by promoting them into higher ranks. But job performance, professionalism, dedication, self-awareness, and on-the-job results aren't necessarily signs of someone who's learning agile. Instead, it's possible your organization is mistaking "high professionals" for "high potentials."

High potentials and high professionals often appear similar to one another because they share some common qualities that make them valued talent. These include the following:

 High Professionals	 High Potentials
High performers Dedicated learners In low supply in most organizational settings High in self-awareness and results orientation	High performers Dedicated learners In low supply in most organizational settings High in self-awareness and results orientation

But on closer inspection, some subtle—but nonetheless important—differences start to emerge:

 High Professionals	 High Potentials
Seek depth Value certainty Refine existing solutions Seek status and recognition Rely on knowledge and proven expertise ("We should . . .")	Seek breadth Embrace the unknown Create new solutions Seek exposure and new experiences Rely on intuition and willingness to experiment ("What if we . . .?")



Of course, the above characteristics are only typical of each category of talent. Not all high professionals or high potentials demonstrate these behavioral preferences, and certainly there are individuals in each category that sometimes behave in ways more commonly associated with the other category. For example, there may be instances in which high potential individuals are deeply engaged in refining existing solutions versus exploring new ones.

Nonetheless, a picture emerges of high professionals directing their considerable talents along a path more consistent with strong functional expertise and addressing very challenging technical issues that require deep knowledge and highly refined skills.

High potentials, by comparison, are intrigued by “the new and the different” and revel in opportunities to break boundaries and discover new solutions. Their curiosity about the people, problems, places, and things that are interesting but not yet familiar to them can lead both their careers and the organization in new and unexpected directions. It’s not unusual to see the LinkedIn profiles of learning agile talent with a number of “slashes” to designate their varied professional identities. Their resumes often look more like a zig-zag of roles and experiences than a straight-line progression of functional roles.

The day-to-day actions and the longer-term career journeys of high professionals and high potentials are driven by different orientations toward learning. In the above table, we noted that both high professionals and high potentials are dedicated learners, but the kind of learning they are dedicated to differs. The following chart illustrates some of these differences in what each group seeks in learning situations:

Mastery Orientation (High Professionals)	Agile Orientation (High Potentials)
Clearly defined problems Sufficient facts “Best” or “right” solution Following established practices Answering questions	Ambiguously defined problems Insufficient facts Many possible solutions Devising own practices Generating new questions

As with the previous comparison, these are only typical preferences, and each individual will differ to some degree. Hopefully these comparisons give you a better sense of what differentiates these 2 very important categories of talent and the preferences and behaviors that characterize each. Having a more fine-grained understanding of high professionals and high potentials helps accurately identify each and also ensure that they're placed in situations that are suited to the types of challenges they seek, putting them on a pathway to continued success.

For high potentials, the general prescription is to place them into situations that are ambiguously defined and require innovative solutions. But it also requires putting them into settings that are "first-time" in nature for them and require developing new knowledge and skills to succeed. This is where learning agility becomes of primary importance to their success.



How to Elevate and Encourage High Potentials

If your high potential employee is already on the right track but needs an extra nudge, consider having a learning agility conversation with them using the "LACE" behaviors outlined below. This approach can also help expand the positive impact of their learning to their team, department, or the organization as a whole.

L: Listen as they explain how they tried something new and navigated adaptational challenges.

A: Ask what helped them be successful. Identify their strategies and make them explicit.

C: Challenge them to think about where else they might use the new approach or skillset, and who else might benefit.

E: Establish next steps for follow-through and sharing knowledge. Execute on ideas that make learning agility's value visible in the organization.

For more information on this model, explore our [Better Conversations Every Day™](#) program.



How to Develop Learning Agility

While learning agility encompasses a broad and diverse set of behaviors, it can be developed. For your organization and employees to become more learning agile, 5 principles are important to embrace:

Learning agility is a “life” skill. It is, in part, a product of our experiences in life and what we’ve learned from them. These include experiences we have outside of work. We can apply lessons learned from experience in both our professional and personal lives over the course of our lifetime.

Learning agility can be learned. And the main ingredient is experience. The more we gain access to rich learning experiences and position ourselves to learn as much as we can from them, the more a virtuous cycle of learning and growth can take shape.

Anybody can learn it. As mentioned earlier, there are no demographics that reliably differentiate who is and isn’t learning agile. It comes down to the ability to “learn how to learn” coupled with experiences that can provide the right degree of novelty and challenge.

Learning agility is like a muscle. Without a steady stream of new experiences for learners to refine the 4 core skills at the beginning of this white paper, learning agility can plateau or taper off.

Awareness is key to nurturing learning agility. Learn to ask questions—of yourself and others—to help see where experience can inform new solutions to challenges.

Developing learning agility requires focus on 3 critical components:

1. The appropriate *mindset* for learning.
2. A refined *skillset* to navigate the 4 components of learning agility (above).
3. A *toolset* that can be readily accessed and applied at various points throughout a learning experience.



Organizational Challenges to Learning Agility

We've worked with countless individuals and organizations to improve learning agility. Along the way, we've run into several primary reasons people give for avoiding opportunities to enhance learning agility. Ultimately, most of their explanations can be traced back to a broader organizational issue. Here are 4 common examples of the types of organizational cultures that thwart learning agility:

Risk-averse cultures that don't encourage people to experiment and make mistakes.

Siloed cultures where employees feel pressured to stay in their lanes rather than pursuing learning opportunities.

Overdrive cultures where leaders feel so overwhelmed that they can barely keep up, let alone take time to reflect and learn.

Punitive cultures where employees keep their heads down and worry that new ideas or experiences come with a risk of failure.

Sometimes the issue is more benign, and employees simply don't see how learning agility experiences would benefit them in their current organizational setting. Organizations that commit to addressing their existing culture and finding ways to promote learning agility will eventually be able to win support from their employees, leading to wider individual acceptance of learning agility.



Getting the Right Experience

Finally, let's focus on getting access to the right experiences to fuel learning agility. These 3 variables are critical: quantity, quality, and diversity.

What sometimes goes unappreciated is that you can control these variables in your organization. More specifically, you can curate specific experiences for specific individuals that will maximize their learning and development. *Done right, it can be an opportunity to invest in some of your key talent while simultaneously addressing important organizational challenges.* Only the savviest organizations do this in a mindful and strategic manner.

Quantity speaks for itself. The more distinct learning experiences we have in life, the more opportunity there is for learning.

We've identified 10 characteristics of **quality** learning experiences to help you think about opportunities for growth: unfamiliar responsibilities, new directions, inherited problems, problems with employees, high stakes, scope and scale, external pressure, influence without authority, working across cultures, and work group diversity.

CCL research has also revealed that the vast majority of learning experiences can be sorted into 15 categories. These **diverse** scenarios each provide distinct learning opportunities that offer a chance for dramatically different lessons.

15 Types of Learning Experiences



Bosses and superiors



Personal experiences



Culture crossing



Turnaround



Crisis



Career setback



Increase in job scope



Stakeholder engagement



Difficult people



Horizontal move



Ethical dilemma



Feedback and coaching



New initiative



Mistake



Coursework and training



Put it all together and the goal over time is to accumulate as many high-quality experiences as possible in a diverse number of categories of experience to generate positive ROE: Return on Experience.

We should note that, even with the right mix of experiences, this alone isn't a guarantee of learning. Without a learning mindset, it's possible to move through experiences without absorbing anything. Indeed, different people can walk away from the same experience with takeaways that vary dramatically in terms of the depth and breadth of their learning. That's why it's important to understand the 4 behavioral elements of learning agile leaders—seeking, sensemaking, internalizing, and applying—outlined in more detail earlier in this white paper.



Coaching Learning Agility in Others

If you want to help cultivate learning agility in your direct reports, team, or organization, we recommend having a coaching conversation that relies on these 6 questions:

1. *Can you tell me about a recent challenge you experienced where you initially weren't sure what to do?*
2. *How did you approach it?*
3. *What happened?*
4. *What did you learn?*
5. *What is its value to your team, and to the organization?*
6. *How can you apply what you've learned?*

Over time, asking these intentional questions will help your colleagues become more reflective. It will encourage them to start incorporating a learning-agile mindset into everything that they do.



CONCLUSION

Where Do We Go From Here?

The need for learning agility is obvious. We live in a rapidly changing world, where industries and sectors routinely experience disruption, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Without the ability to adjust quickly to new scenarios, an organization's future could be in peril. It's not enough to continue performing well under classic definitions of success and progress—now, leaders are expected and required to experiment, embrace discomfort, and generate new solutions. Think of learning agility as a core component of your organization's strategy for creating “future proof” leaders.

The good news is that your organization already has learning agile individuals, whether you've identified them or not. Hopefully this white paper has given you a stronger understanding of what to look for; you can easily refer to the charts above whenever you need a refresher. Remember that learning agility is a *key differentiator* between high potential talent and high professional talent in your organization.

Most importantly, we hope you internalized the fact that learning agility can be developed. With the right mix of rich, diverse opportunities over time, you can help yourself, your employees, and your teams acquire a deeper level of learning agility, creating positive ROE, and benefiting people individually and the organization as a whole.

If you're approaching this issue as an individual leader, you have an important role to play in cultivating learning agility. As a leader, you can *pay attention in a new way* and also *help people articulate what they've learned*. Start paying attention to the unique experiences your colleagues or direct reports are having, both inside and outside of your organization. Help people think about what they've learned and how their insights can be put to use. By understanding learning agility, practicing it, and identifying and nurturing it in others, you can have an outsized impact on your organization.

Ready To Take The Next Step?

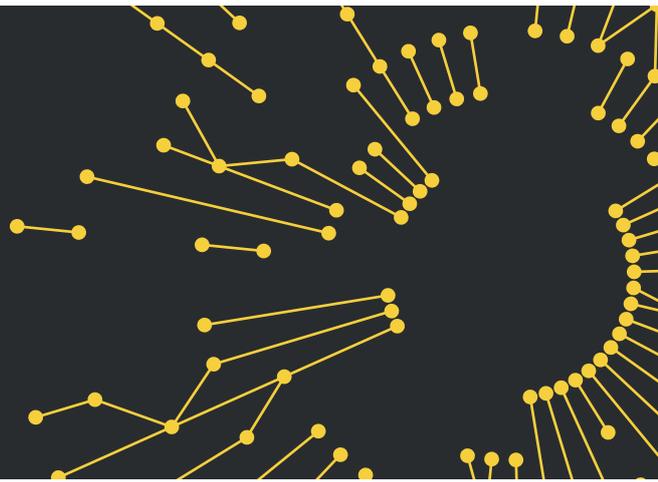
Tackling this task can seem challenging, or even overwhelming. To better prepare you for that challenge, we encourage you to [read more](#) about the different elements of fostering a learning-agile skillset, mindset, and toolset, or [ways you can scale that learning throughout your organization](#). But the introduction provided in this white paper should be enough to get you started on the right path. Your organization can use the approaches we've highlighted to create a “leadership blueprint” for leaders at all levels to embrace the characteristics of learning agility. With this essential skill, the future won't look as scary—it will appear as a welcome challenge and an opportunity for growth.

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It's quite another to lead it.

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Laura Santana, PhD, is a senior leadership solutions partner at CCL. She leads cross-regional/functional teams in the design and delivery of customized learning and development solutions for global clients. In multiple languages, Laura leverages deep experience and insights from psychology, neuroscience, contemplative practice, and physical fitness as she works with clients to increase personal and organizational learning agility for sustainable growth and results that matter. She led CCL’s worldwide team in the launch of its online follow-through system to drive application of learning back to the organization. Laura holds a doctorate from Antioch’s Leadership and Change Program, a Master of Science in Management and Organizational Development from United States International University–Mexico, a BA in Psychology from the University of California–Irvine, and is certified both as a mind-body wellness specialist and personal trainer. She is an author and featured speaker at international conferences on leadership.

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