

Identifying the Learning Agile Leader

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Leaders create meaning so others can think and act.”

It's no secret that today's top 21st-Century companies benefit from talented leadership. The competitive edge that dynamic leaders bring to an organization is reflected in the bottom line, as well as in retention rates of top performers. Some companies have begun to discover that they lack “bench strength,” especially in leadership positions.¹

While it has never been easy to pinpoint the qualities that define the best leaders, a body of recent work suggests that “learning agility” is essential to success in leaders. What does learning agility mean in the context of business leadership? Les Woller, president of Woller and Associates, defines agility as the ability to think “appropriately for [a given] situation, adjusting behaviors and thinking in a timely fashion [in order] to optimize positive outcomes under changing conditions.” In other words, the ability to think on one's feet and rally those around you to achieve positive results in almost any circumstance. “Leaders,” says Woller, “create meaning so others can think and act.” This paper will examine the importance of agile leaders in the context of today's complex and competitive global business atmosphere and discuss the following:

- What a learning agile leader is and how to identify one
- How to avoid mistaken identify of leadership agility potential
- The benefits of agile learners in leadership roles
- The benefits of agile leaders to an organization

First, let's take a brief look at the background of the agile learner concept.

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

In 1993 the National Learning Foundation, (NLF),

[W]as invited to make a presentation to The White House Think Tank on "Envisioning the Future: Education and Training," sponsored by the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and organized by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). This occasion was NLF's first public presentation of the Agile Learner concept. The NLF report noted that whereas schools played the major role in educating people in the past, today's communication technologies were creating an entirely new societal learning

¹ “Leadership positions” may include C-level and other senior executive positions but are not confined to them. Department managers, line managers, and others in key positions all have leadership roles to play.

system in which schools are but one among many powerful players. NLF called for an examination of ways in which the new learning system could be focused more effectively on developing the new kinds of learners needed in an age of continuous change. Such learners would require mastery of a much broader set of learning abilities and performance attributes. They would have to become Agile Learners - flexible, life-long learners who thrive on change and deal effectively with massive amounts of information. NLF published *The Agile Learner* in July 1993, which interlaces basic educational, social, psychological, and managerial issues within a well-grounded theoretical framework.²

Figure 1, below, illustrates the agile learning concepts discussed in the NLF report.

Figure 1³

<u>Attributes of the Agile Learner</u>		<u>Skills of the Agile Learner</u>	
Personal	flexible creative introspective curious imaginative adaptable aesthetically aware ambiguity tolerant acts from integrity	Essential	literacy/numeracy mastery of technology communication negotiation
Interpersonal	celebrates diversity altruistically motivated effectively interdependent ---collaborator ---team player	Performance	systems thinking pattern detecting synthesizing analyzing experimenting problem solving decision making reflective thinking

Agile learners (sometimes referred to as “agile learners”) are,

“ . . . just-in-time as well as lifespan learners that thrive on change and have the skills and attributes needed to excel in the virtual corporations of the 21st Century.”⁴

This definition fits in well with Woller’s, especially when tied to his concept of agile leadership. Furthermore, early work on the agile learner concept produced the construct shown in Figure 2, a clear example of the differences between what

² Source: <http://www.parshift.com/Speakers/Speak003.htm>

³ Source: http://xnet.rrc.mb.ca/glenh/agile_learner.htm and above for a slightly different structure

⁴ ibid

old-style HR management wanted in employees and what 21st-century Human Capital Management professionals need.⁵

Figure 2

<u><i>The Industrial Age</i></u>	<u><i>The Information Age</i></u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • please superiors • command-and-control • stable • meddle • conforming • need-to-know • fiefdoms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delight customers • empowering and participatory • agile • enable • outside-the-box • open and transparent • interdependent networks

The concept of agile learners is therefore relatively new. Woller and others have begun to apply it to the concept of leadership in order to help today's organizations prepare for the future. What are some of the trends that drive this effort?

IRREVERSIBLE TRENDS

Business today is governed by several irreversible trends that in turn are driven by a number of factors. The trends are:

- Speed of doing business in a 24/365 environment⁶
- Complexity of business transactions
- Integrated solutions applied to global processes

These factors that drive these trends are:

- The information explosion
- The pressure to perform
- Adoption of new technologies
- Globalization and other economic factors
- Changing skill requirements
- Shifts in values
- Aging leadership

It may be the last point above, 'aging leadership,' that is most pertinent to this discussion. The United States isn't the only country with a "Baby Boomer" generation. The aging population is a fact over much of the developed world, and as today's oldest workers begin to retire or otherwise scale back on their

⁵ ibid

⁶ Multi-national corporations work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year

commitment to work, the need to replace them with new leaders will become ever more acute. In order to develop the agile leaders who will succeed the generation about to retire, it is first necessary to identify agile learners.

IDENTIFYING AGILE LEARNERS

Leaders with agility begin as agile learners. The easiest way to identify agile learners is to keep in mind a simple mnemonic:

Resourceful, Relationships, Resilient, and Results

These are Woller's "Four R's" of agile learners; each impacts leadership potential, as discussed below in more detail.

Agile learners are *resourceful*. They focus on what is important, they can project the outcome of their efforts, and they see connections among the work they do, the work of their colleagues, and the organization's goals. Employees who are not resourceful haven't learned to focus on their deliverables, are unaware of the impact of their work, and take a very narrow view of their place in the organization.

Agile learners are *relational*, that is they have good relationship-building skills. They listen and ask questions rather than give answers. They are tolerant of diverse opinions, not rigid, "do it this way" people. And they engage others through their personality; they are "fun to be around" instead of coming off as a loner.

Resiliency is also another attribute of agile learners. They can take personal pressure and are positive and relaxed when under pressure. Agile learners are curious and will ask the why of a situation rather than become defensive. Employees who are not resilient fear rejection, often appear weary or tired of situations, have a negative attitude, and jump to answers defensively.

A focus on *results* is another hallmark of agile learners, who will persevere through tough situations ("tough it out"). They have high standards and are goal-driven. They have a strong work ethic and are willing to sacrifice. In contrast, employees who are not results-focused are easily discouraged, they make non-specific excuses for failing to execute on their deliverables, and often look for the "path of least resistance" to make their way through the day.

Agile learners' ability to see connections, listen to others, work with grace under pressure, and make sacrifices is a large part of what allows them to learn from their experiences. And experience counts when it's part of consideration for leadership. How do the Four R's impact leadership potential and how are potential leaders identified?

IDENTIFYING LEARNING AGILE LEADERS

The qualities that define agile learners are usually found in agile leaders, and are to some degree predictive of leadership ability. For example, the ability to build relationships, a quality of relational skills, may allow one to see himself or herself as both “actor and director” – able to participate in the work flow but also with the perspective to direct it. Resiliency allows potential leaders to change or adapt to situations, and as well as imbues them with the curiosity to ask questions and seek feedback. Resourcefulness and a focus on results allow learning agile leaders to remain motivated, disciplined, focused, and energetic, qualities that are essential for leaders. In combination the qualities of agile learners are crucial to agile leaders because the qualities allow leaders to deliver results – and results accrue to the bottom line.

As noted above, the qualities of agile learners can be predictive of leadership ability. How does one test the validity of this statement? Let’s examine one desired leadership competency, problem solving, to see if certain agile learning qualities are related to it.

The ability to solve problems (or “meet challenges”) is considered essential to a good leader. What learning agility qualities might predict the presence of this competency? Problem solving requires the following skills:

- The ability to see connections and root causes
- The ability to speak (or relate) in the language of the audience
- The introduction of new perspectives
- The ability to perform under first-time (first-sight) conditions

The ability to see connections and project outcomes is a mark of being *resourceful*. The ability to “speak to” the target audience – the stakeholders around one who need the problem solved or are part of the team charged with solving it – is a mark of one’s ability to build *relationships*, as is the tolerance needed to entertain diverse opinions and bring new perspectives to bear to the problem at hand. And the ability to perform under first-time conditions is directly related to the qualities found in those who are *resilient* and focused on *results*. In summary, just one desired competency of leaders, success in problem solving, draws on all Four R’s of agile learners.

THE ARTT™ OF AGILE LEADERS

Les Woller has a method of describing agile leaders that focuses on four general behaviors. They form a feedback loop as illustrated in Figure 3, below.⁷

⁷ Copyright 2006, Les Woller, all rights reserved

Figure 3

ARTT™

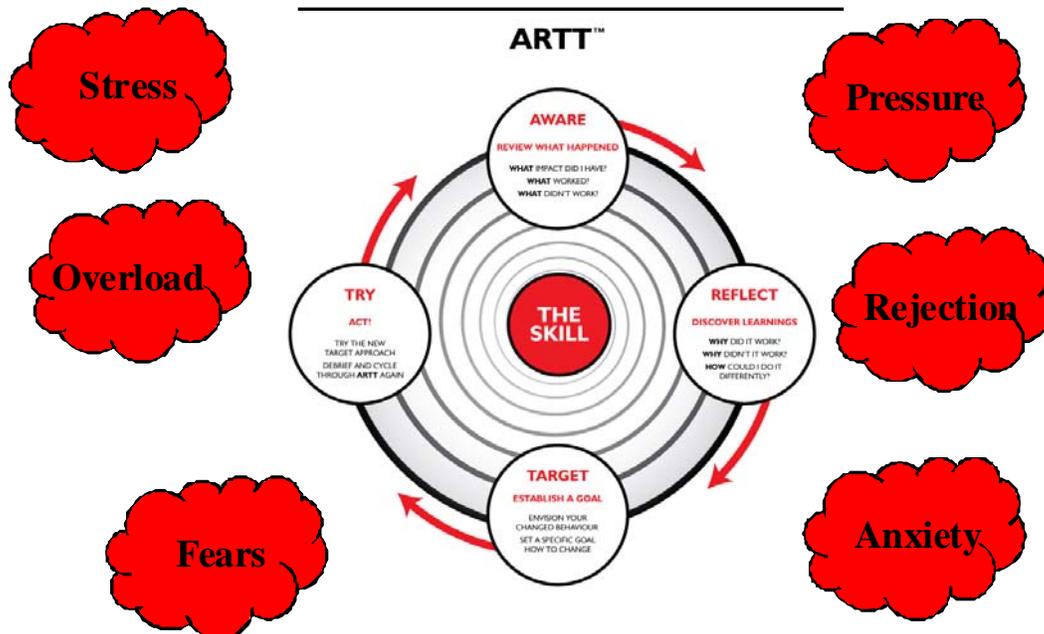


Agile leaders, Woller says, continually provide their own feedback through self-talk (or self-examination), central to an exercise that first draws upon an *awareness* of the lessons experience teaches. Agile leaders have the ability to *reflect* on these experiences, apply their knowledge to achieving a *target*, and then *try* to achieve the target. In this loop self-talk is the central point, or clearinghouse, of an agile leader's experiences and allows him or her to constantly adjust behavior and thinking in order to achieve results in changing circumstances.

There are many factors that can intervene at any point in this feedback loop. Woller depicts them as shown below.

Figure 4

“Barriers” to Learning Agility



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Any one of these factors can cause one to question or doubt an action, decision, or even the meaning of certain experiences. Yet pressure, stress, anxiety and related “barriers” are not uncommon in the business world. Agile leaders have the ability to handle these barriers to success and even use them to their advantage. Woller says that the best leaders are able to pause and ask themselves questions in the face of pressures. That’s because they understand context, Woller asserts. “Context matters. It’s important to think things through afresh as context changes.” When multiple barriers to learning agility are in play, Woller believes that agile leaders go through a five-step process (not necessarily consciously) shortly after an experience and/or in real time:

- Hitting pause
- Engaging in self-talk
- Asking oneself the right questions
- Adapting to the context of current circumstances
- Observing the impact of the adaptation

As noted the pause/question process may not necessarily be a conscious one. Woller says that there are four stages of competence, or learning:

1. Unconscious incompetence
2. Conscious incompetence

3. Conscious competence
4. Unconscious competence

An individual may be unaware that he or she is incompetent, whether the incompetence is in a particular skill or is general. But people who are aware, and have begun to engage in the ARTT™ feedback loop, for example, soon develop an awareness of where their incompetence lays – a sign of an agile learner and the first step towards developing future competency.

Then comes a time of “conscious incompetence.” An individual becomes aware of strengths and weaknesses in the context of his or her work. Agile learners take this knowledge to develop competencies and internalize them, (Stage III, above) which eventually leads to “unconscious competence” – a well- integrated internalized feedback loop that is itself a competency and a mark of agile leadership.

AVOID MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Most leaders have three or four predominant strengths, Woller observes, and successful leaders do not have fatal flaws. If a leader is particularly weak in the competencies found under one or more of the Four R’s, Woller advises caution. Woller explains by way of the fictional Four R scorecard of one person:

Figure 5

Resourceful	Relational	Resilient	Results
High	Low	Moderate	High
3	1	2	3
Scale: 9 with 12 maximum			

This person scores very well overall on a 12-point scale but scores poorly in a key Four R area: Relational. “The ability to build relationships is crucial to leadership,” Woller says. This leader is low in this skill. While he or she is resourceful, results-focused, and reasonably resilient, bringing stakeholders together to achieve results is a desirable competency. Woller notes, though, that this person could be effective if paired with another agile leader who has complementary strengths.

Agile leaders might have weaknesses but non-agile leaders have fatal flaws. Non-agile leaders:

- Don’t think strategically
- Are arrogant
- Do not build networks

Have relationship issues above and below their positions and with peers

Figure 6 is a list that provides another way to discern those competencies, or behaviors, most important to agility.

Figure 6

Non-agile attributes		What Matters
<input type="checkbox"/> Many Topics	—————	Essence / Focus / Relevance
<input type="checkbox"/> Verbal Skills	—————	Action / Results
<input type="checkbox"/> Seeks Information	—————	Meaning / Output
<input type="checkbox"/> Generalizes	—————	Specificity
<input type="checkbox"/> “Co-mingles”	—————	Compares / Contrasts
<input type="checkbox"/> What Focus	—————	What, How, and Why
<input type="checkbox"/> Tasks / Others	—————	Self Aware / Own Role

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Non-agile learners are represented by the attributes in the left-hand column in Figure 6. Contrast these attributes with those of agile learners – and agile leaders. Non-agile learners might be conversant in many topics and have excellent verbal skills, but they might not grasp the relevance of a subject, and their verbal skills could be a substitution or even cover for actually doing something and getting results. Non-agile learners might solicit information about a project or deliverable but could be unable to discern the meaning of the information they get and turn it into meaningful results.

Agile learners can generalize but also look for specificity and think in those terms when considering a project or course of action; non-agile learners tend to generalize and might be unable to drill deeper into a subject. Agile learners know how (or have learned) to compare and contrast when presented with choices and different courses of action, non-agile learners might “mingle” the information they’re given without being able to differentiate good choices from poor ones. Agile learners focus on what (needs to be done), how (it will get done) and why

(it's important to get it done). Non-agile learners tend to focus on the “what” without much of an idea how to accomplish it or even why it's important. Finally, non-agile learners think in terms of their own tasks and little of what others do; agile learners are aware of their own role in the larger scheme.

“The learning agile leader will be open to input from others and able to be their own coach both after the fact and in real time,” says Woller, who believes these attributes are probably the most important for a leader to have. What are some of the possible benefits to a company of agile leaders who display these attributes? The well-publicized fact that bad leadership can demonstrably have a negative effect on a company's fortunes seems to make asking this question rhetorical, but many organizations think of leadership, when they think of it at all, only at the top levels – senior executives and C-suite occupants. But developing agile leadership in all levels throughout an organization is what builds the bench strength needed for tomorrow.

BENEFITS OF AGILE LEADERSHIP

There are four major benefits to turning agile learners into agile leaders.

- Leadership bench strength improves
- The ability to lead a company through times of change is enhanced
- Retention of high potential talent increases
- Business performance improves

All four benefits are closely linked. As noted in the beginning of this paper, the pressure of competition for talent combined with aging leadership has led forward-thinking companies to begin assessments of their “bench strength” – the depth of talent at key positions, not just top-level leadership. Because of the worldwide shortage of talent for the knowledge economy most companies will need to find most of their future leaders within their own ranks. Successful succession planning for leadership positions by identifying agile learners and supporting their career growth will improve leadership bench strength, which in turn will help a company through times of change. And the ability to *lead* change gives a company a distinct competitive advantage that is manifested through improved performance.

The competition for talent also affects a company's ability to retain talent. Today's workers don't feel the same loyalty to a company as previous generations did.⁸ Many are being actively recruited or are aware of other opportunities. A succession plan that recognizes agile learners, supports them and provides them with leadership opportunities, as noted above, will greatly improve talent retention rates.

⁸ About 60% of U.S. workers would leave their current job if the right opportunity came along, according to a recent Monster survey of 1000 workers.

CONCLUSION

Today's agile learners can become the agile leaders of tomorrow. Companies that want a competitive advantage have started the learners-to-leaders continuum by identifying agile leaders who already make a positive impact on the company, and using their experience to find future agile leaders. This is part of the essential – many argue crucial – process of succession planning. Woller reminds those charged with this task to keep in mind a few key points:

- Recognize and accept the irreversible trends that drive business today – the speed of doing business in a 24/365 environment, the complexity of business transactions, and the move towards integrated process solutions that require flexible and adaptable thinking.
- Identify and develop the attributes of agile learners to become agile leaders, and to discern the differences – sometimes subtle – that set the agile apart from those who are not.
- Finally, keep in mind the benefits of agile learning leaders – the competitive advantage they bring to a company through the quality of their work, the results they produce, and their ability to lead through changing times.

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Based on the Human Capital Institute webcast, *Identifying the Agile Learner*, June 15, 2006

## PRESENTER

Les Woller is president of Woller and Associates. The focus of his practice is executive assessment and coaching and he provides consulting services in the selection of and development of leaders. Since completion of naval service, Mr. Woller has accumulated 30 years of business and management experience, including being the former Vice President of Human Resource Planning and Development at Battelle, a world leader in research and development. He also worked in line-management and organizational development at General Electric Medical Systems. Over the years Mr. Woller has designed succession-planning processes, developed executive educational programs, implemented organizational improvement techniques and managed executive selection processes. In addition, he has worked in the areas of leadership development and executive coaching. He has also worked with Boards of Directors to facilitate the CEO selection process. Les is one of the pioneers of the Learning From Experience interviewing process. This approach features evaluations of competencies and learning

agility as the primary predictors of future performance and has greatly enhanced organizations capabilities to select top performers.

## PANELISTS

Dr. Lawrence Clark is an Assistant Vice President - Executive Development at New York Life Insurance Company. In that capacity, he provides expert consulting services to New York Life, its subsidiaries, and its senior executives. At New York Life he has been a member of two Core Competency Teams, a member of the Sourcing Committee, and a member of the SAP - HRD implementation team. In addition he has major responsible for the design of the Leadership Effectiveness Program, Developing Excellence in Leadership, and the program for Vice Presidents. Prior to joining New York Life, Larry was Vice President of W. Warner Burke Associates, Inc., a Pelham, N.Y. based consulting firm. He has conducted research in the areas of managerial competencies, organizational climate, and management training. He is interested in applying organizational and social psychology techniques to problems that confront major organizations.

Michael Harper has 20 years of operations, marketing and executive search experience combined with 8 years as President of TalentGenesis Inc., a consultancy engaged in the design and delivery of large-scale initiatives in Talent Management including succession, leadership development, selection, performance management and measurement of organizational impact. Michael has facilitated 360 feedback, career planning and development coaching to over 700 individuals ranging from CEOs to middle managers. He has certified over 1000 HR professionals in the LEADERSHIP ARCHITECT Suite of tools from Lominger Limited in the US and Europe. With the TalentGenesis team, Michael has designed and licensed The Development In Action Series of competency-based development workshops delivered to thousands of managers.

Patrick R. Pinto, Ph.D., Founder of Pinto Consulting Group, is an organizational consultant whose experience covers a broad range, from individual development to human resource strategy for organizations. Prior to forming his firm, he was a faculty member at the University of Minnesota. Pat has long been affiliated with Lominger Ltd., Inc. as a Master Certifier for their Leadership Architect? Suite of learning and development tools. He is a frequent speaker at management seminars, and a faculty member in executive education and leadership development programs for many of the world's leading companies. Dr. Pinto also serves as an executive coach to assist leaders in accelerating their potential for the future and improving their performance.

Linda Rodman is President of Rodman Resources LLC a NYC based leadership and talent management consulting firm specializing in improving her clients' abilities to build the human capital necessary to successfully implement their business strategies. Linda, a Lominger Master Associate, has been practicing for over 30 years in the area of organizational excellence. She founded the Firm 18 years ago after working in a succession of HR positions at Exxon Corporation. She focuses her practice on: leadership and culture development, succession planning, change management, team effectiveness, competency modeling, assessing and enhancing learning agility, selection, and performance management. She also specializes in high-impact executive coaching. Linda works across industries including Financial Services/Insurance, Manufacturing, Pharmaceutical, Professional Services, Retail, and Service.

## MODERATOR

Joy Kosta

As Director of Talent Development and Leadership Communities at The Human Capital Institute, Joy brings twenty-five years of experience in multiple facets of organizational development, human resources and business management with an emphasis in customer satisfaction, service quality, process improvement, and applying the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence. As founder and President of Performance Partners in Health Care, a company dedicated to building better patient experiences, she has authored several curriculums in leadership and staff development, and co-authored with Harold Bursztajn, MD Senior Clinical Faculty member, Harvard Medical School, *Building a Treatment Alliance with Patients and Families*.

## AUTHOR

Thomas V. Durgin, Senior Writer/Researcher, the Human Capital Institute