

WHITE PAPER



## Learning Agility in Healthcare

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## **Learning Agility in Healthcare Performance Outcomes**

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Learning agility has been defined as the ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply those lessons in new situations. This competency has become popular in high potential leader identification and leadership development. The research that we conducted in the current study is based on the concept of learning agility defined by DeRue, Ashford and Myers (2012), in which the authors defined learning agility (LA) as an extension of learning from experience. This definition builds on experiential learning by integrating the concept of agile, or nimble learning. The authors discuss two important components of learning from experience: a) the speed of learning, and b) the ease with which an individual can switch perspectives (flexibility with ideas). This conceptualization of learning agility is attractive because it is specifically defined and theoretically grounded.

Part of the basis of our research idea stemmed from conversations with colleagues about gaining the value of an additional competency that supports the organization's strategy without having to discard previous work and assessment methodology. For example, emotional intelligence 360's have significant overlap with learning agility 360's. This creates a challenge for practitioners who have valid tools in place. Some measures of LA include commonly measured elements such as people agility, which mirrors interpersonal effectiveness constructs. For this reason, we have chosen a model that is theoretically sound, yet distinctive.

Learning agility is particularly demanded during times of increased complexity and ambiguity. Strategies of the past will not succeed, and the ability to iterate is critical.

This research investigates the value of deriving LA from individual assessment measures and including it as a distinct part of the executive assessment reporting. Agility is of great interest to healthcare based on the major transformation required by electronic health records, population health initiatives and Affordable Care requirements. The dramatic transformation requires leaders who can learn quickly and continue to adapt in short timeframes per legislative incentives.

Executive assessments are a best practice in executive development and selection. The assessments typically include a variety of cognitive and leadership instruments supported by simulations and I/O psychology interviewers. A practical question for an organization utilizing executive assessment is, “how might we identify learning agility in the cognitive and non-cognitive assessment components in order to include the competency in decision making and succession discussions?” The relationship between LA, as it is derived from assessment reports, and executive performance was evaluated. This approach also provided content analysis to determine where simulations can be revised to strengthen the number and quality of LA observations.

Hypothesis 1: Learning Agility positively predicts goal attainment for senior leaders.

Hypothesis 2: Speed of learning from experience positively predicts performance.

Hypothesis 3: Flexibility with ideas positively predicts performance.

## Methods & Results

A large, national healthcare organization contributed executive assessment data to study the relationship between LA and performance. The assessment output is a report indicating participant readiness and fit for an executive role in a healthcare organization. In order to evaluate the relationship between LA and performance, executive assessment reports were coded for LA by multiple raters. For those selected candidates, subsequent performance data was available. The current number of participants for whom both executive assessment results and subsequent performance data were available was 23. The sample is 87% male.

The present research requires that the model be predictive. It was important that the performance measure was taken at least 6 months following completion of the executive assessment. This time lag strengthens the argument that LA is a predictor of performance. For this reason, only participants who completed at least one performance review following their assessment were included in this study. The time lag varies from one to two years in the given sample.

Executive Assessment reports were coded for seven characteristics and behaviors that are consistent with LA. The overall LA measure was categorized into the two dimensions: speed of learning and flexibility with ideas. Multiple raters were used to calibrate the ratings. A sample indicator for speed of learning is “sees and describes patterns holistically.” A sample indicator for being flexible with ideas is “applies past learning to new situations to find parallels and contrasts.”

# Learning Agility Coding

|                        | Characteristic  | Opposite  | Where Characteristic Appears       |
|------------------------|---|---|------------------------------------|
| Speed                  | Gets to root causes of issues   | Superficial thinking                                  | Case study/Strategy                |
|                        | Develops clear solutions to novel situations                            | Over generalizes or gives illogical solutions         | Case study                         |
|                        | Sees patterns holistically (pattern recognition)                        | Works from long list/misses cause/effect              | Strategy in case study             |
| Flexibility with Ideas | Comfortable with ambiguity and complexity                               | Rigid exhibits discomfort with grey                   | Self-management/Work Style         |
|                        | Applies past learning to new situations to find parallels and contrasts | Over applies learning without adjusting to new facets | Interview/Integration/Reasoning    |
|                        | Finds creative solutions to difficult problems                          | Uses one "hammer" for all issues                      | Interview/Integration/Reasoning    |
|                        | Can interpret and evaluate multiple possibilities and perspectives      | Seeks one right answer                                | Integration/Work style/Open-minded |
| Other, Related         | Seeks challenge   | Needs to be sure of high performance/low risk taker   | Self-management/Work style         |
|                        | Cognitive ability   | Misses assumptions and interpretations.               | Reasoning assessment               |

Participants were scored on each of the indicators using a 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) Likert type scale, with behavioral anchors used to clearly define low versus high scores. The scale reliability for the speed of learning indicators was somewhat low ( $\alpha=.56$ ). Reliabilities for the flexibility with ideas scale and the composite were acceptable ( $\alpha=.72$  and  $\alpha=.77$ , respectively).

Performance was evaluated by each participant’s manager in the regular performance appraisal cycle for the healthcare organization. Performance is a measure of goal attainment. Goals are concrete and quantifiable, as these executive roles have financial and growth targets.

These scores are on a 1 to 5 scale and represent the degree to which each participant was successful in attaining business goals that were established based on the business planning process and assigned during the previous performance review cycle. Our premise is that achieving business goals in a turbulent environment presents a challenge that requires learning agility. There are environmental factors, competition and large scale internal changes that facility leaders must resolve in order to meet their goals.

Example: Facility Leader

Report Statements:

“Able to develop sound inferences and test assumptions”

“Creates logical frameworks for strategy”

“Impressive in...shaping of the issues...a number of ideas...possible approaches”

Ratings: Speed: 3.67   Flexibility: 3.75   Overall: 3.71

Performance Example: Attained goals despite external challenges caused by shortage of access to primary care in region.

**Hypothesis 1** predicted that LA would be positively related to subsequent performance; thus, the LA total score was regressed on performance. Despite the small sample size, LA was positively related to performance ( $\beta=.46$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Results supported hypothesis 1.

**Hypothesis 2** was evaluated by regressing the speed of learning from experience dimension of LA on performance. This hypothesis posited that speed of learning would predict subsequent performance. Results indicated that this is indeed the trend ( $\beta=.44$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

**Hypothesis 3** was evaluated by regressing the flexibility with ideas dimension of LA on performance. This hypothesis stated that speed of learning would predict subsequent performance. Results indicated that this hypothesis is supported. ( $\beta=.37, p<.05$ ). Flexibility with ideas and perspectives is positively related to future ratings of goal attainment.

The results of the present research provide evidence that LA and the speed and flexibility dimensions of LA as derived from executive assessment results can predict performance in a high complexity and high change environment, such as healthcare. This supports claims that LA is an important and valid element in predicting employee performance. It also provides a model for consultants to integrate competencies into existing processes when it is not ideal to make dramatic changes in instruments or methodologies. The appeal to this approach is that we can go back and re-evaluate individuals who have been assessed and more thoroughly integrate the competency into future reporting. We contend that the healthcare industry is an ideal example of a rapid change environment.

The present results provide good preliminary support for the use of LA in executive assessment practices in healthcare, the sample used in this study is limited. The sample size of 23 limits the generalizability of these results. This is a typical challenge for validating work done on small populations. As the organization leverages executive assessments and on-boarding development planning, their turnover of these key positions is quite low. However, this approach lays out a solid practitioner model for updating existing multi-tool methodologies as a particular competency or construct becomes more important to an organization's strategic capabilities.

## References

- DeRue, D. S., Ashford, S. J., & Myers, C. G. (2012). Learning agility: In search of conceptual clarity and theoretical grounding. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 5*(3), 258-279.