

Essential Qualities of an Agile Leader

Recent research has determined the importance of "learning agility," a set of leadership behaviors that help drive innovation and grow a company's bottom line.

Your company may value leadership that's resilient, adaptable, and flexible, but do you truly possess those attributes? While these are qualities a leader needs to be successful, they're hard to measure and track in performance assessments.

Metrics such as revenue and reviews from employees are all easy things to quantify--a leader either increases the company's EBITDA, creates new revenue streams, and is well-regarded, or she doesn't do those things and is not well-regarded.

A relatively new leadership quality, which researchers at Columbia University call "**learning agility**," deserves more of a company's focus. This refers to a set of characteristics that help a leader "stay flexible, grow from mistakes, and rise to a diverse array of challenges." Learning agility, which requires emotional intelligence, "relates to behaviors--such as the ability to recover from and capitalize on failure--that some managers would prefer not to think about," the duo write.

Joint studies by Columbia University and Cornell, comparing scores of 100 private company executives in a typical 360-degree assessment, the personality test, and their own Learning Agility Assessment Inventory, found that leaders who tested high for learning agility were equally effective in their ability to be agile leaders – and thus helped their companies grow their bottom line.

Researchers also found that agile leaders have the ability to "jettison skills, perspectives, and ideas that are no longer relevant, and learn new ones that are." There are four skills most associated with being leadership agility, as well as one behavior that will kill a leader's growth.

1. Ability to innovate.

agile leaders take charge, and challenge the status quo, but may have been described as "difficult to manage." They don't challenge established thinking or assumptions just to be difficult, however - they have their own original ideas and ways of doing things. Innovating requires new experiences, which

provide perspective and a bigger knowledge base. Leading with agility generates new ideas through the ability to view issues from multiple angles.

2. Outperform through challenges.

Learning from experience occurs most often when overcoming an unfamiliar challenge. But in order to learn from such challenges, the individual must remain present and engaged, handle the stress brought on by ambiguity, and adapt quickly in order to perform. Pulling that off requires skill at observation and processing of data, as well as the ability to acquire new skills to tackle the situation revealed through the data.

3. Reflect on experience and get feedback.

This type of leader doesn't only seek new experiences, she learns from them. A major aspect of being learning agile is to continually seek feedback and process it. A leader who seeks feedback and takes it in will have more insight into their own shortcomings and blind spots. Research shows that self-awareness was found to be "the single highest predictor of success across C-suite roles".

4. Take good risks.

Learning-agile leaders, tend to be pioneering risk-takers. They are resilient and are calm in the eye of a storm of stress. "They venture into unknown territory and put themselves 'out there' to try new things. They take 'progressive risk'--not thrill-seeking, but risk that leads to opportunity," the duo write. "They volunteer for jobs and roles where success is not guaranteed, where failure is a possibility. They stretch themselves outside their comfort zones in a continuous cycle of learning and confidence-building that ultimately leads to success."

5. Do not defend against criticism.

On the flip side, the biggest behavior that hinders leadership agility is defensiveness. Being open to experience is fundamental to learning. Individuals who remain closed or defensive when challenged or given critical feedback tend to be low in learning agility. By contrast, high learning-agile individuals seek

feedback, process it, and adapt based on their newfound understanding of themselves, situations, and problems.

While it is difficult to change one's behavior, research by Columbia University has found that these types of leaders stand out for "their resilience, calm, and ability to remain at ease" no matter the situation. "It's not just that they are willing to put themselves into challenging situations; *it's that they're able to cope with the stress of these challenges and thus manage them more effectively.*"

Adapted from Inc.com, Bill Y.