



9 LEARNING AGILITY STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU THRIVE DURING CHALLENGING TIMES

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Turbulent times are not new to leaders and organizations. However, the recent pandemic has produced a level of personal stress and organizational upheaval not seen in modern times. It's no surprise that leaders and teams are fatigued and languishing under the relentless pressure.

During the pandemic, many organizations have struggled, yet many others are thriving in the chaos. So, what is it that sets them apart? In the recent SIOP Professional Practice Series book, *The Age of Agility: Developing Learning Agile Organizations and Leaders*¹, we share our research which identifies a critical factor that determines whether leaders and organizations will adapt and grow during challenging times – learning agility.

At its core, learning agility is the capacity to adapt to first-time, often tough situations using a variety of behaviors and personal strategies to nimbly learn from our experiences and adjust. Learning agility empowers leaders, teams and organizations to grow and evolve with a changing landscape, making them more agile and focused with each challenge.

Thankfully, learning agility is a skill that can be cultivated and improved. But developing this “muscle” requires willingness, effort, discipline and resilience. By focusing on the following nine strategies and behaviors, you can build and strengthen your learning agility.

1. Mindful Awareness

A leader's “get things done” mentality is great for action but can make it difficult to see a situation without judgement. Mindfulness is not simply about meditation. It requires full awareness of the present reality to quickly shift from System 1 (fast-reactive) thinking to System 2 (slow-deliberate) thinking. Mindful leaders are self-aware – they know what they're feeling and why, so that their emotions don't control their actions or cause them to act impulsively.

2. Forecasting

To be agile, leaders should anticipate what new skills they and their team will need and predict what ongoing capabilities are necessary. For example, a manager might ask some team members to attend a conference on business management while others read a book about working with remote teams. This allows the entire team to become more aware of current issues, and how their skills may affect them in the future.

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3. Curiosity and Openness

While mindfulness and forecasting can point the way, curiosity and openness allow you to move toward an agile learning experience. But changing a deeply ingrained mindset about how you have always worked can be the hardest part of learning agility. Leaders should ask themselves and their teams what new opportunities may arise if they change their approach. In addition to changing *what* they're thinking about, being curious and open to new ways of thinking may also enable the team to impact *how* they approach current and future challenges.

4. Courage, Experimentation and Practice

Trying new things is frightening and exciting, and it's normal to be apprehensive as you venture beyond your comfort zone. As with any difficult skill, courage is required and is nurtured through deliberate experimentation and practice. Each success will bring you more confidence. Be prepared to "get comfortable being uncomfortable." Start small. Focus your practice by being intentional and testing a variety of tactics to discover the method that best fits your style.

5. Maintain a Learning Mindset

Studies show that leaders who demonstrate a learning mindset notice opportunities for improvement, grow their skills and adapt more easily. They often view challenges – and even mistakes – as opportunities to learn and develop. To get into this state of mind, replace self-defeating messages, such as "I'll never be able to lead a remote team," with more productive ones like "What approach might work better next time?"

6. Learn from Others

People often believe their leaders have all the answers, are confident and self-assured, capable of mastering any task or situation without assistance. However, it's important to realize that successful leaders recognize their limitations and embrace the knowledge of others. They don't know it all, but they know where to turn to find answers. Asking for help demonstrates wisdom and maturity rather than weakness.

7. Seek Feedback

Knowing what to start, stop, or continue is tough to know without seeking regular feedback from a variety of viewpoints. Asking for comments may feel awkward at first. However, requesting feedback can be as simple as calling, emailing, or texting a colleague to ask, "What


do you think went well?" or "What would you suggest I do differently next time?" It's easy to be defensive if the feedback is critical, but being open and curious will ensure others remain comfortable giving feedback in the future.

8. Reflect

Reflection provides opportunities to distill lessons from your experiences and turn them into "learning experiences" that can then be applied in the future. It enables you to proactively think ahead about how you will put a new capability into practice. Set goals such as, "For our next meeting, I'm going to focus on asking questions rather than telling the group what to do." After-action reflection helps you determine what worked and what didn't. This can be done immediately following a meeting or at longer intervals, such as recapping daily or weekly progress.

9. Resilience

Clarity of purpose about why change is important keeps us grounded when times are tough. Having a structured learning plan and goals gives us focus, allows us to plan action steps for how to achieve our goals, and identify ways to measure progress. Considering obstacles and preparing "if-then" statements can help clarify opportunities to change our thoughts or behaviors. For example, "IF I find myself talking too much in a meeting, THEN I will pause and ask a question to engage others."

Becoming learning agile requires looking at life through a new lens and being courageous as you approach things differently. While it takes tremendous, intentional effort to develop, learning agility empowers us to survive and even thrive in these unpredictable times. 



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¹ Harvey, V. S., & De Meuse, K. P. (2021). *The age of agility: Building learning agile leaders and organizations*. London: Oxford University Press.