# A Researcher's 'Intro' to Learning Agility

If you do a Google search on what appears to be the hottest topic in organization **development, "learning agility," you'll find more than** 16,000,000 hits. Many of these are attempts to define learning agility, some are advertisements for tools for developing learning agility, some are on assessment, and some are theoretical articles. What you seldom see is actual research on the construct.

If you want to learn the recent status of scientific peer-reviewed research on learning agility, a good place to look is in a well written article published in *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice* 5 (2012) by D. Scott DeRue, Susan J. Ashford and Christopher G. Myers from the University of Michigan. DeRue et al. summarize their learnings from studying agility related research using the following model.
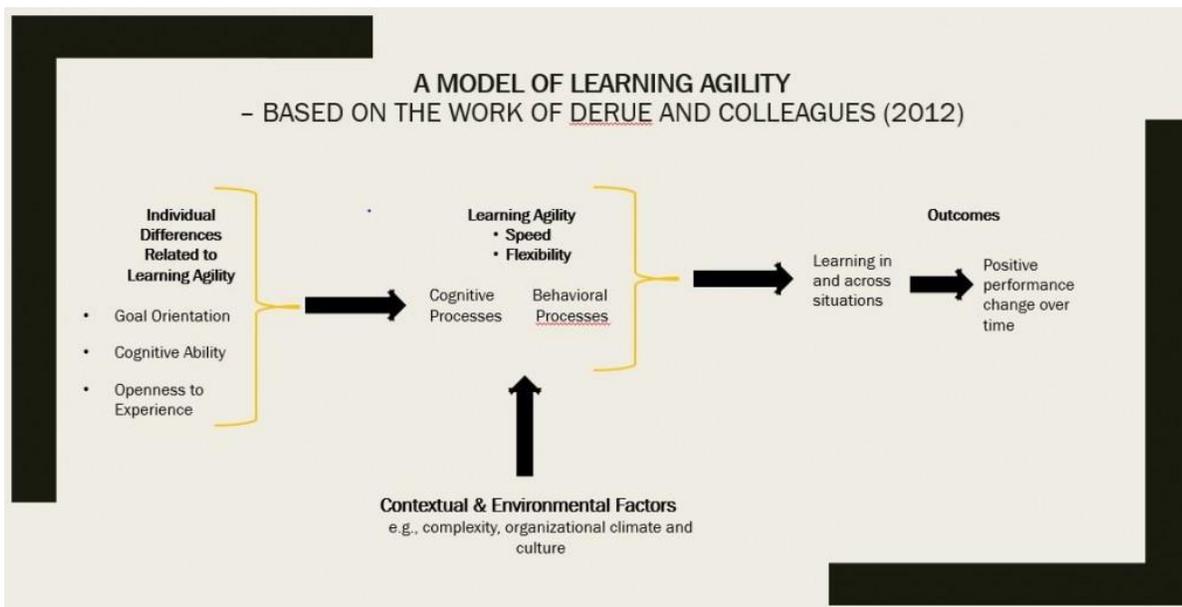


From left to right, DeRue et al. lay out a framework for understanding empirical research which supports learning agility as a construct unique from learning ability. This distinction is important because it addresses a common mistake in past research, according to David E. Smith, Ph.D., president and CEO of E·A·S·I-Consult®. **"It's not that cognitive or learning ability is an unimportant part of learning agility,"** Smith said. **"But there is only a baseline amount of intelligence that is needed to be learning agile."**

Earlier research tells us that individual differenc**es "set the stage" for learning agility. They** include goal orientation (for example, Farr, Hoffmann, & Ringenbach 1993) cognitive ability

(for example, Hunter 1986; Hunter & Schmidt 1996) and openness to experience (for example, LePine, Colquitt, & Erez 2000; and Barrick & Mount 1991).

The center point of learning agility is represented by two fundamental processes: cognitive and behavioral. A cognitive process might be cognitive simulations, such as visualization, where lessons can be extracted before even having the experience, or pattern recognition, where an individual is able to identify patterns within seemingly unrelated and complex situations.

A behavioral process might be feedback seeking (e.g., Ashford and DeRue, 2012). This is more than just passively waiting for others to provide feedback to our own actions. It is active. One could expect that seeking feedback enhances the flexibility with which people are able to see and draw connections between their behavior and outcomes. A second behavioral process related to learning agility is experimentation, for example, trying out new behaviors or approaches to a particular action (Debowski, Wood, and Bandura, 2001). This might be a leader taking on a novel job assignment and trying out behaviors that are new to them (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b). Finally, taking the time to reflect on the lessons of experience has been identified as a behavior that affects learning agility (e.g., Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003).

These cognitive and behavioral processes are said to provide a structure and a set of behaviors through which the learning agile can augment their speed and flexibility in learning from experience. It is suggested that individuals higher in learning agility are more likely to engage in them and the more they engage in them, the more learning agile they will become.

Of course, contextual and environmental factors such as the complexity of the new experience and the organizational climate and culture play a big role in the outcome of learning from experience, and thus learning agility.

DeRue et al. offer that this narrower conceptual focus, outlined in their model of learning agility, has great promise in helping us identify those who can be agile in learning from experience as well as train employees to engage in experiences of various types to maximize their learning and development.

For more information, refer to DeRue et al (2012).

As E•A•S•I-Consult prepares to launch the Burke Learning Agility Inventory™, **"With millions of hits on the subject, clearly, interest, eagerness, and practice is way ahead of research and theory," said Warner Burke, Ph.D., a researcher and professor at Teachers College,**

Columbia University. Burke's research provides the foundation of the Burke Learning Agility Inventory.

"Much scientific work is needed," he continued. "But this is the exciting part of our venture. With a reliable instrument to work with, we are now on the cusp of establishing comprehensive validity and applicability in the workplace and for individual development and performance."

## About the Author

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