

Applying Learning Agility in an Organization

Many people can appreciate that learning agility is an important concept - like motivation, emotional intelligence or intentional leadership - but what does it look like when you implement it in an organization?

I have been working with a healthcare organization of approximately 20,000 employees for about four years. To be sure, change and uncertainty are factors all organizations must address - and they may be increasing in intensity year over year - but these factors may be even more pervasive in healthcare.

“Just in time” talent is another universal issue that some organizations manage more effectively than others through very targeted leadership development and succession planning programs.

Effective leadership development programs have a few elements that set them apart:

- Active support by senior management, including the CEO,
- A program that takes place over a period of 12 months or more and is integrated into **a participant’s day**-to-day responsibilities, and
- The portion of the program in which people are exposed to leadership content includes well-researched tests/instruments that provide multi-rater feedback about their performance.

The healthcare organization I have been working with has such a program. The program is designed for a group of 100 high-potential leaders from across the organization. This group is informed that they are viewed as high potentials, and it is very prestigious to be asked to participate. It is also clear that there are no guarantees that a person will achieve that higher-level responsibility simply through program participation; that kind of responsibility must be earned on an ongoing basis based on performance.

What is the process, and how does learning agility fit into this?

Individuals are “nominated” for this leadership program. Each nominee is reviewed/discussed by the executive committee, which then decides by consensus who will be invited to participate and who will not. For those selected for this high-potential cohort, one of the internal leader development people conducting the program will meet with them and brief them on what is involved. The time commitment is significant and is in addition to, not in lieu of, their other duties. Few decline to participate. There is pre-work (a little

reading and completion of some online questionnaires) that will be used in the four-day leadership seminar, which is presented to groups of 20 people. It is at this event where participants meet others in their cohort.

Participants are exposed to leadership content in several areas. First, the topic is defined. In some cases, there is an experiential exercise in which participants learn firsthand what the concept looks like in action. Participants are shown an example of what their feedback from the questionnaires will look like, then are asked to make a prediction about their feedback before actually receiving that input.

The facilitators spend time with participants to help them come to terms with what the feedback means and what they will need to change about themselves. In the case of learning agility, this is the first content area. We give participants a learning journal in their materials to track their insights throughout the rest of the program.

Throughout other exercises in the program, for example, we indicate that a particular exercise could allow opportunities to work on a specific learning agility dimension, such as *Performance Risk Taking*. We also provide a platform for groups of three to discuss positive and negative examples of past behavior. We tell them this is an opportunity to work on *Interpersonal Risk Taking*, another learning agility dimension.

Once all the content has been presented, there is one last integration exercise, which I like **to call the “final examination.” I indicate there is not any new content to present; all** participants need to do now is apply what they have learned in this final exercise. Several people can choose other participants and lead them in a multiple-round building exercise in which there are a number of decisions that need to be made and financial and leadership consequences attached to those choices.

After the exercise, we spend quite a bit of time analyzing *what happened* and *why it happened* using the content from the program.

During a recent program, a woman who led a group through this exercise made some decisions that might have been interpreted as being on the higher end of risk taking. In the discussion that followed, she said that her strategy had been to do something differently than she would normally do at work. Her team ended up being the most successful in the exercise and she learned something valuable that she could take back and apply on the job.

That is the next step in this program. Participants set a goal for something they are going to work on starting the very next day at work. They are told to take an existing performance goal and integrate what they learned from the program into that performance objective.

This group of 20 now becomes part of the larger group of 100 that meets on an ongoing basis (at least quarterly). These quarterly sessions are an opportunity to revisit and work on the concepts from the original program. Many participants leave the initial program and feel like they understood the concepts but realize once they go back to the office and try to **implement what they learned, it is not so easy. These “booster sessions” provide additional opportunities to dig deeper into the content.** People are assigned mentors and some are assigned coaches.

At the end of the 18-month experience, a subset of the group of 100 meets with the executive committee and participants are each asked to answer **the question, “What did you learn?” This is just one example of how learning agility can be applied in an organization.** In this case, the application is leadership development.

About the Author

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