

Defensiveness: The Enemy of Learning Agility

The smartest person in the room is also the most learning agile, right?

The short answer is no.

Among the many misconceptions about learning agility is the notion that it is synonymous with learning ability. **To be sure, a person's overall intelligence or learning ability is important... to a point. Some amount of it** is certainly necessary, but once you get past a certain threshold, ability and agility become independent concepts, and smarter does not equal more learning agile.

Someone of above-average intelligence, for example, may not be very learning agile if he or she is defensive about receiving perceived criticism, because defensiveness gets in the way of learning agility.

Where does defensiveness show up in relation to learning agility? E·A·S·I·Consult® subscribes to the Burke Learning Agility Inventory® (Burke LAI®) test as the most accurate means of measuring learning agility.

There are nine dimensions to the Burke LAI:

- Flexibility
- Speed
- Experimenting
- Performance Risk Taking
- Interpersonal Risk Taking
- Collaborating
- Information Gathering
- Feedback Seeking
- Reflecting

While feedback can occur within any of those learning agility approaches, five are harder to demonstrate without some element of feedback:

- Experimenting
- Performance Risk Taking
- Interpersonal Risk Taking
- Collaborating
- Feedback Seeking

Let's focus on Feedback Seeking within the Burke LAI. (The issues around Feedback Seeking that lead to defensiveness will apply to the other four dimensions, as well.)

I recently came across the title of a great article by Leah Fessler - [To Give Better Feedback, You Must Fully Understand the Agony of Receiving It](#) - says it all. At E•A•S•I-Consult[®], when we train another consultant to administer a test, we first require that person to take it, then receive feedback so he or she knows firsthand what that feels like.

I attended a conference earlier in the year in which several of the presentations, at least as indicated by their titles, were about eliminating performance appraisals. Often, when people in business think of feedback, a one-hour annual performance review is what comes to mind. The results of this short, once-a-year **summary affect the person's salary increase** and possibly other aspects of their pay.

Sound pretty stressful? For a lot of people, it is.

In too many cases, the annual performance review is the first time a person has heard about any performance issues. In some cases, the issue is something that occurred six to nine months ago. *Why is that?*, you may ask. Good question.

The presenters at the conference I mentioned discussed having to train feedback-givers on how to actually give the feedback - how to be descriptive and present the information in a way that the other person clearly understands what action he or she needs to take to improve. Incidentally it ended up that they did not do away with performance appraisals.

Under Feedback Seeking in the Burke LAI, test-takers are asked if:

- They can approach their bosses to get feedback
- They can ask their peers and others for feedback
- They can ask their bosses about their future potential.

Those are all very straightforward actions, but not ones most people take on a regular basis. In her article, Fessler cites Sheila Heen, co-leader on the Harvard Negotiation Project, who **defines feedback as 'all the information available to you about yourself every day.'** A lot of that information is informal and non-verbal, things like facial expressions or nods.

Fessler describes a real paradox people have regarding feedback. We want to hear what others have to say about us because we want to learn and grow but, at the same time, we want to be accepted and respected. Those polarities make us ambivalent, at times, about whether we want feedback.

The other big issue Heen describes centers around who is giving the feedback and the **context and circumstances surrounding that person's input. People often ask questions to point out flaws in the feedback. Does the feedback-giver understand the situation? Do I trust this person? Do they know what they are talking about? How and where did they give the feedback? If we can find out what is wrong with the feedback, then we can discount it.** Defensiveness.

The ironic thing is we really shouldn't care who the source is, according to Heen. Advice will be either good or bad. There is either something valuable in it for me or there is not.

One last complication. Heen mentions Carol Dweck's (Stanford University) work on mindset, with which I am very familiar. Dweck says there are two mindsets: fixed and growth.

Someone with a fixed mindset sees feedback as a verdict on whether you measure up or not. Feedback to a fixed mindset is threatening. Growth mindsets, on the other hand, see feedback as information that just helps them better know and understand areas in which they need to improve. As you can see, these are very different ways of viewing feedback.

Everyone has a natural predisposition to approaching new learning situations in certain ways. The more learning agile a person is, the more of the nine Burke LAI capabilities he or she will be able to access. Everyone can increase any of those capabilities, no matter where they start. But defensiveness is a major roadblock, and will time and time again prevent us from hearing and appreciating the feedback so critical to our continued improvement.

About the Author

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