

Ever Struggle to Measure Potential? Learning Agility Can Help!

In many organizations, key decisions about employees' intended career paths are made by examining two things: *performance* and *potential*.

Although performance management systems differ from one organization to the next, the outcome of those systems is typically quite similar - **some sort of quantitative "score"** thought to reflect how well an employee has performed over a defined period of time.

If the criteria (often competencies) against which the employees are being measured have **been clearly defined and consistently applied, this isn't necessarily a bad process...** although many users (i.e. overworked managers) might push back on that conclusion.

In contrast to performance, the way in which potential is measured can vary more substantially. All too often, it looks something like this: A group of senior leaders, often **with a human resource manager present, sit around in a room and discuss each employee's** potential.

Some processes may be more standardized than others, but at least some amount of subjective opinion - and thus, bias - typically remains and factors into what is ultimately written down about an individual. **This begs the question, "Isn't there a more scientific way to measure employee potential?"**

According to leadership experts, the answer is a resounding yes! In the October *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article, "[What Science Says About Identifying High-Potential Employees](#)," Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, CEO of [Hogan Assessments](#), Seymour Adler and Robert B. Kaiser indicate the first step toward that objective measurement rests in answering the **question, "Potential for what?"**

The co-authors note that organizations often define potential based on the likelihood of individual success (e.g., potential to move up two roles in five years) but point out that an **employee's individual success does not necessarily** translate to a crucial contribution to the organization.

High Potential Employees = Key Drivers of Organizational Performance

These same leadership experts suggest that organizations should **"...define future stars as the people who will consistently generate exorbitant output levels that influence the success or failure of their organizations."**

The way in which these “stars” do this can be identified and measured across job contents, industries, etc. using the following three general markers of high potential:

- Ability
- Social Skills
- Drive

Linking Markers of High Potential to Learning Agility

Ability: Is the employee able to do the job? More importantly, with regard to potential, will the individual be able to learn and master the requisite knowledge and skill? To Chamorro-Premuzic, Adler and Kaiser, **ability is not just about the “substantial cognitive component” needed to “pick up new knowledge and skills fast and flexibly”, it also requires motivation.**

This is the essence of Learning Agility. In fact, as measured by the Burke Learning Agility Inventory[®] (Burke LAI[®]), agility reflects the *speed* and *flexibility* with which a person adapts to new situations by learning from past experiences. Further, the behaviors measured **on Burke’s assessment reflect both the person’s skill and motivation**, thus providing a well-rounded perspective on potential.

In this way, we can move beyond just measuring what a person *can* do (ability) to also tap into what they *will* do (agility).

Social Skills: Given the importance of **teamwork and collaboration in today’s global** workforce, it is perhaps not surprising that employees must be able to maintain relationships and work well with others. In their *HBR* article, the three leadership experts divide this **ability into two categories: “managing oneself” and “managing others”.**

Learning Agility, as measured by the Burke LAI, is invaluable for measuring this aspect of **employee potential. In fact, two of Burke’s** nine dimensions of agility measure Interpersonal Risk Taking - defined as *discussing differences with others in ways that lead to learning and change* - and Collaborating - defined as *finding ways to work with others that generate unique opportunities for learning*.

Drive: Chamorro-Premuzic, Adler and Kaiser describe this as the **“will and motivation to work hard, achieve, and do whatever it takes to get the job done... an ability to remain dissatisfied with one’s achievements”.** They note that this potential can be identified behaviorally, as well, using the example of an executive-level role that requires a global mindset and willingness to embrace the discomfort of relocation.

One way to measure this drive is through the Burke LAI, which directly measures Performance Risk Taking - defined as *seeking new activities (tasks, assignments, roles, etc.) that provide opportunities to be challenged* - and Information Gathering - *using various methods to remain current in one's area of expertise*.

As with most key issues **in the field of workplace psychology, there is no “silver bullet”** to measure all facets of leadership. But given what science tells about what differentiates high potential leaders today, Learning Agility - when measured by the Burke LAI - offers us a theoretically based, scientifically sound, validated measure of leadership potential. And that is something to get excited about, indeed!

About the Author

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