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High Learners as High Performers

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Selection, staffing and succession planning should be a combination of looking at those characteristics that don't change much over time and can be detected early (such as intelligence) and those that flower across time as the person learns to deal with fresh situations.

Previously (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000) we proposed that an important part of being a high potential was being a high learner (being high on learning agility). The premise of that article was that if people learn, grow, and change across time (and consequently develop new skills – not just enhancing what they already have), then comparing the competencies of a promising 25 year old to the competencies (success profile) of successful 50 year olds will not be totally informative.

Promising 25 years olds are not just miniature versions of successful 50 year olds. Selection, staffing and succession planning should be a combination of looking at those characteristics that don't change much over time and can be detected early (such as intelligence) and those that flower across time as the person learns to deal with fresh situations.

Our essential argument was that learning new job and technical knowledge is different from learning new personal behavior or ways of viewing events and problems. Street smarts, common sense or simply learning from life experience is different from how intelligent a person is (as measured by IQ tests, grades in school, or accumulating technical knowledge). Research to that point (Sternberg et. al., 1995) has also shown this to be a difference that makes a difference. In the Sternberg studies, a measure of street smarts was far more predictive of level attained in organizations than was IQ.

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One reason for this may be that many of us are more likely to rely on our successful habits from the past rather than going to the trouble of creating new ones. Under the pressure of change or first-time situations for us, we stick to our comfort zone, repeating what has worked before or switching to a different past solution, but not a new strategy. A second reason is that organizations ordinarily select for intelligence, but not for learning agility so there should be more variance in learning agility than intelligence.

Our initial article described the development of our learning agility instrument known as CHOICES ARCHITECT®. The initial item set was partially based on research done at the Center for Creative Leadership (McCall et al, 1988; McCall and Lombardo, 1983) on learning, growth and change among successful and derailed executives and middle managers. Through content analysis of interview and survey data of executives (Lindsey, Homes and McCall, 1987), as well as a research intervention study with 55 managers, it became apparent that those who succeeded in making a behavioral or attitudinal change had specific learning strategies that they could articulate to varying degrees.

Further review of relevant literature on learning strategies (such as studies of children who “spontaneously” learn to read - Pressley, Borkowski and Schneider, 1987) indicated there were some common themes in learning something new. Items were written to tap constructs of learning agility that were hypothesized from prior studies and relevant literature. All items were either explicitly learning oriented or required learning in order to perform under first time conditions.

As a result of factor analysis, four factors that describe different aspects of learning agility were constructed. They are:

1. People Agility – Describes people who know themselves well, learn from experience, treat others constructively, and are cool and resilient under the pressures of change.
2. Results Agility – Describes people who get results under tough conditions, inspire others to perform beyond normal, and exhibit the sort of presence that builds confidence in others.
3. Mental Agility – Describes people who think through problems from a fresh point of view and are comfortable with complexity, ambiguity and explaining their thinking to others.
4. Change Agility – Describes people who are curious, have a passion for ideas, like to experiment with test cases, and engage in skill building activities.

Each of these factors was significantly associated with being considered a high potential, having good to high performance and staying out of trouble. The four factors together correlated significantly with criterion measures (R-square = .30 for both). Each scale correlates significantly with criterion measures (P<.0001).

People high in learning agility and likely high potentials:

- Seek and have more experiences to learn from.
- Enjoy complex first time problems and challenges associated with new experiences.
- Get more out of these experiences because they have an interest in making sense of them.
- Perform better because they incorporate new skills into their repertoire.

The face they show to the outside world is:

- Being eager to learn about self, others and ideas.
- Showing genuine willingness to learn from feedback and experience and change their behavior and viewpoints as a result.
- Being interested in helping people think and experiment.
- Being resilient and philosophical about what happens to people who push change.
- Being uncompromising – while wide open to diversity, multiple sources and a range of views, once they incorporate these into their thinking, they are described as stalwart in pushing their notions. They rely on logic, perseverance, well thought through ideas and cool communications to sell their points.

The learning agility tool is intended to spot and nurture those with growth potential, to be used as an aid in selecting and developing people who will learn the most from their experiences and assignments. Our research also indicated that the significant relationships are accounted for by the learning scales, not group (gender, level, age, line/staff) or company membership. No group had a strong rating edge over another.

Additional Research

Since our first article, we have explored additional questions. Would earlier Choices Architect scores predict later promotion? Would people with higher Choices Architect scores perform better once promoted? Would there be a difference in the type of promotion that high learning agile people received? Does Choices Architect measure something unique or it is basically a variation of intelligence or personality variables?

The results* of those studies were:

- **CHOICES ARCHITECT® (learning agility) scores didn't predict who was or was not promoted.** We expected that Choices Architect scores probably would not predict promotion. There are many reasons to be promoted that have nothing to do with learning agility: doing more of the same kinds of jobs, few candidates available, the higher Choices Architect candidates turn it down, a high performer in a specific knowledge or technology area is promoted instead of a high potential, politics, managerial cloning, seniority, or just bad calls on talent. This was the case. Learning agility ratings were unrelated to who got promoted. Decision makers did not consider learning agility as a criterion for who got promoted.
- **People with higher Learning Agility scores performed significantly better once promoted.** People with higher Choices Architect scores were quite a bit better able to meet the fresh challenges of new jobs (R square = .33). When people with higher Choices Architect scores were promoted, the net performance of the promoted people was significantly stronger.
- **People with higher Change Agility (one of the Choices Architect factors) scores got more challenging promotions.** We defined this as first time for the person; little or no prior experience – new people, demands, functions to deal with. Requires making a significant transition – such as professional to manager, manager of staff to manager of managers, functional head to general manager, manager of a unit to multiple units; different language; international assignments.

Does Choices Architect measure something unique or it is basically a variation of intelligence or personality variables?

Although we were only able to measure this in one firm, the results indicated that high Choices Architect scorers received more challenging promotions. Lower scorers received more of the same promotions such as taking as moving up to take their boss's job.

- Learning agility scores were unrelated to IQ or personality variables, and accounted for all the significant relationships with performance and potential.

Choices Architect scores were more related to ratings of promotability than IQ or a personality measure.

A study by Connolly and Viswesvaran (2002) found that learning agility (as measured by Choices Architect) was a much stronger predictor of performance and promotability when compared with an IQ measure and a measure of the Big Five personality factors. All the significant relationships were between the Choices Architect factors and the criterion measures. When introduced last into logistical regression equations, Choices Architect ratings accounted for more variance than did IQ or personality. Specific findings from this study showed that Choices Architect scores were:

- More related to ratings of promotability than IQ or a personality measure.
- More related to job performance than IQ or a personality measure.
- Unrelated to IQ. It instead picks up personal adaptability that is unrelated to how traditionally smart a person is.
- Mostly unrelated to a personality measure of the Big Five personality factors. It is somewhat related to Openness to Experience, which is to be expected, but not related to any of the other factors.

This study demonstrates the usefulness of learning agility measures and throws doubt on two common arguments that learning agility is a surrogate for IQ or personality variables.

Choices Architect measures a set of behaviors that adaptive people use in order to learn new behaviors and deal with change. Learning agility is different than being intelligent.

These additional findings support our original research used to develop the Choices Architect tool. Choices Architect measures several aspects of learning agility, which in turn is related to being promoted into and performing better in first time assignments and new challenges.

It is clear that learning agility should be considered when promoting people, especially to new and tough assignments.

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* *Due to space limitations, the steps followed in the research were not presented here. Interested readers should contact Michael Lombardo at mlombardo@mindspring.com for a technical summary.*



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