

# Seven faces of learning agility

Smarter ways to define, deploy, and develop high-potential talent

By George Hallenbeck, Vicki Swisher, and J. Evelyn Orr

July 2011

Learning agile leaders are not interchangeable. Korn/Ferry research indicates most fall into one of seven distinct profiles. Understanding the natural strengths of each leads to more strategic decisions about job assignments.

Our three decades of research have validated *learning agility* as a reliable indicator of potential for leadership roles. Why? Learning agile individuals excel at absorbing information from their experiences and then extrapolating from those to navigate unfamiliar situations. They are often described as flexible, resourceful, adaptable, and thoughtful—in short, an ideal fit for mission-critical roles.

Those terms, however, don't fully capture the richness and diversity apparent when this group is examined more closely.

Recent Korn/Ferry International research reveals that most learning agile people fall into seven distinct categories. These findings add depth and clarity to our understanding of what it means to be learning agile. Organizations can leverage these insights to make optimal decisions about how to deploy and develop their high-potential talent.

## The seven profiles

Korn/Ferry conducted three phases of research into how learning agility is expressed in different people, and how those “profiles” are best leveraged.

The first phase was an empirical analysis of individual assessment data to discern whether distinct profiles even existed. Working from a database of 2,242 managers and executives from 25 companies in four global geographical regions, we drew out a subsample of 1,245 individuals who would be classified as “high learning agile,” those with scores at or above the 67<sup>th</sup> norm percentile.

### Learning agility: Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do

Learning agility is the ability and willingness to learn from experience and then apply that learning to perform successfully in new situations.

People who are learning agile:

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

A person who is learning agile has more lessons, more tools, and more solutions to draw on when faced with new business challenges.

That subsample was then analyzed looking at scores on the four factors of learning agility: Mental Agility, People Agility, Change Agility, and Results Agility. Any strong deviations from the norm were flagged and then the data set was re-examined to see if patterns started to emerge from these deviations.

In the end we found that seven distinct profiles described approximately two-thirds of the high learning agility people.

Much like personality types, no profile is better or worse than the others. Each has its own combination of strengths and developmental needs. Below is a brief summary of the seven profiles. (Extended descriptions are provided in Lominger's High Learning Agility Profiles tool.)

**Problem Solvers:** Given an ambiguous problem, they explore its complexities, develop a notion of what will work, and then set about resolving the situation with a mix of drive and resourcefulness. Along the way, they seek to involve others and leverage their abilities. This is the most frequently occurring of the seven profiles and most closely fits the "classic" definition of a high learning agile person.

**Thought Leaders:** Determined seekers of insight and truth, they ask hard questions and strive to make difficult connections. They are committed to seeing progress; however, they tend to function best behind the scenes versus being out-front champions for change.

**Trailblazers:** They have a clear sense of where they need to be and are determined to make it there, sometimes by whatever means are available. Laser-focused and confident in their approach, Trailblazers are at home where others fear to tread.

**Champions:** Like the hero in a classic tale, individuals fitting this profile have a flair for saving the day in grand style. They can handle difficult situations with humor and grace. By focusing primarily on people and results, they also allow others an opportunity to shine.

**Pillars:** Pillars put considerable effort into crafting and implementing highly refined solutions, but tend to focus more on creating an improvement than making a dramatic change. They lead with a harmonious blend of insightful thinking, focused action, and an open, inclusive manner.

**Diplomats:** When the stakes are high and the situation calls for smooth people skills, these are the individuals you want to be at the forefront. They are deft at sizing up others and can adjust their style to fit the moment.

**Energizers:** Achievement-oriented, extremely hardworking, and able to inspire others, Energizers establish larger-than-life, almost iconic reputations. Energizers put together a committed and capable team and always get the job done.

Further testing of the profiles in companies outside our original research sample reinforced our findings. In some organizations, 75 percent or more of high learning agile people can be classified into one of these seven profiles.

## Getting to know the profiles face-to-face

The next research phase consisted of in-depth interviews with individuals in senior-level roles at a major global retailer to see each profile in action. After being matched to a specific profile using Choices®, a validated assessment of learning agility (see sidebar), executives were asked about a wide range of topics including situations where they felt they had applied their strengths well and situations where they had struggled or learned lessons the hard way. Some non-work-related questions, such as who were persons they admired, were also asked to provide a broader sense of them as individuals. Finally, they were told about their specific profile and asked for their reaction.

These interviews reinforced many of the perceptions that had been formed from the initial data-driven analysis. The executives' comments and anecdotes made the profiles and some of their distinct qualities come to life.

### The Problem Solver: Happy tackling the tough ones

Problem Solvers seem to naturally enjoy immersing themselves in just about any conundrum that comes their way. One interviewee noted that he enjoyed being in a centrally located office specifically because people frequently stopped by to say, "I have a problem" or "Here's one that's tough." Not only did he engage in finding the solution, he wanted to coach others on how to tackle a tough problem. "I love coaching people through stuff to help them discover the outcome. I'm particularly excited when it gives me an opportunity to be creative or encourage others to be creative in the solution." Problem solvers don't confine their efforts to the workplace. Whether it is learning to swim for a triathlon or immersing themselves in an unfamiliar city, there are always new things for them to explore and understand.

### The Thought Leader: Making an impact from the wings

One of the Thought Leaders we spoke with had a role as a communications manager. She hated being in the spotlight or public speaking, but took

#### Source of the profiles

The seven learning agility profiles were derived from data gathered using the Choices® assessment, which measures learning agility.

Organizations use Choices to objectively identify high-potential talent so that they might better deploy people who will learn the most from their experiences and assignments.

Empirical research indicates that Choices scores predict other criteria of success, including supervisor rating of promotability and performance rating after promotion.

great pride in speech writing for executives and coaching them toward success. A memorable success occurred when working with an executive with a history of rocky presentations, and thus low confidence. Through intense partnering, practice, and feedback the Thought Leader guided the executive to a standout presentation. “I would never want to be on stage giving the speech,” she reflected, “but there is nothing more exciting than seeing a person whose speech you wrote get a high score or a standing ovation. That person now wants to work with me again.”

### **The Trailblazer: Getting to results**

Trailblazers are distinguished by their courage and persistence; they let very little, if anything, get in their way. Some Trailblazers have gained perspective on their hard-driving ways. While they can still get quite animated about results (especially when they aren’t up to expectations), they have learned to moderate their style to get the best out of others voluntarily versus pushing them to extremes. Said one Trailblazer, “I have matured in my leadership style—I have learned to tap into what makes others tick and have been much more successful with that. In the past, during the first fifteen years of my career, I would have been much more of a ‘jump on the train or else’ kind of guy.”

### **The Champion: No micromanaging, please**

Champions are predisposed to take an idea and run with it: “Leave me alone and let me do it” is their credo. One interviewee recalled her assignment to start a new line of business in a very hard-to-break-into space. She translated the “we’ve never done it; let’s be conservative” attitude of her leaders into a call to action. She was energized by the challenge because no plan or process existed to get results; it required improvisation and what she referred to as “guerrilla business strategy.” In less than a year, her results were double her goal.

### **The Pillar: Tell me what you really mean**

Of the profiles, Pillars struggle the most with highly ambiguous situations. That doesn’t mean that they like everything spelled out, but they appreciate a supervisor who is straightforward and doesn’t offer pre-packaged sound bites. When asked what he looked for in a boss, one Pillar said, “Someone who can reduce spin. Someone who is the filter. Someone who tells us what we need to do, when we need to do it by, but doesn’t tell us how to get there. Someone who’s clear on expectations and deliverables, but lets us have the creativity to figure out how to do it.”

### **The Diplomat: Bridging distances**

Diplomats thrive on developing intense connections with others and forming trusting bonds. Assignments with wide scope or far-flung teams make this a particular challenge and force them to adapt their leadership style. Said one Diplomat who manages a diffuse internal team, “Now I have

to establish trust at a distance. I can't do it in person anymore. It's more challenging. I have to leverage resources differently and work really hard to get to the real truth and a high level of trust."

### The Energizer: Iconoclastic and proud of it

Energizers' restless nature and tendency to be several steps ahead often puts them in the corporate vanguard. Driven to think and do differently, Energizers' fascination with the groundbreaking and unconventional carries over to their personal tastes. One we interviewed had Faulkner on her list of favorite authors, admired the visionary architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and had early Bob Dylan, Radiohead, and Morrissey on her iPod.

## Putting profiles to work

Each learning agility profile has a specific combination of strengths and developmental needs. Therefore, some job assignments might seem tailor-made for a profile's capabilities, while other situations provide an excellent opportunity to build and add skills.

For example, if a Pillar needs to further develop his or her strategic and/or visioning skills, then putting that person into a start-up operation, where those skills constitute the difference between success and failure, will create a rich and challenging learning experience. Likewise, assignments that give Pillars the best chance for success—those with significant people demands—can also be identified.

Some job assignments might seem tailor-made for a profile's capabilities, while other situations provide an excellent opportunity to build and add skills.

We refer to this practice as *assignmentology*—the thoughtful placement of people in assignments for the purpose of meeting the development needs of the individual and/or the business needs of the organization. When practicing assignmentology, however, organizations must weigh their degree of learning curve tolerance. For example, if a mission-critical international position were open, a Thought Leader could likely hit the ground running. On the other hand, if that position were in a less-important emerging market, a Champion might benefit from that development opportunity (See Table 1).

Table 1  
Assignmentology: Thought Leader vs. Champion

	Thought Leader	Champion
<b>DEPLOY STRENGTHS</b>	<p>Thought Leaders tend to be curious, observant, and insightful. They focus on process, and excel in situations that demand nuanced thinking and the ability to deal with ambiguity. Strong fit for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International assignments</li> <li>• Heavy strategic demands</li> </ul>	<p>The ability to rouse the troops and inspire others to greatness makes Champions a strong fit for larger-scale assignments and those with significant people demands.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Larger-scale assignments</li> <li>• Significant people demands</li> </ul>
<b>DEVELOP MORE SKILLS</b>	<p>Thought Leaders don't establish a strong presence or inspire others to achieve results under difficult circumstances. They will be pushed to improve in situations that are crisis-laden or require a broad impact, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fix-its</li> <li>• Significant people demands</li> </ul>	<p>Champions don't always invest time to carefully scrutinize each aspect of a problem. Thus, they face more challenge in the same posts where Thought Leaders excel.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International assignments</li> <li>• Heavy strategic demands</li> </ul>


Looked at individually, these two distinct types of leader simply appear suited to very different situations. Considered together, a prime opportunity appears: leverage these complementary strengths. Specifically, Thought Leaders can be called upon to tackle the most complex and pressing problems facing the organization and generate a vision for what needs to happen. Building off that, the Champion can “take the plan and run with it” and apply his or her strengths to see things through to the desired results.

For teams, especially senior teams where the work is intense and the stakes are high, profiles can provide team members with valuable insight into how their styles might complement or collide.

Learning agility profiles can be leveraged at the individual, team, and organizational levels. For individuals, matching job assignments to profile strengths and developmental needs ensures that

you are getting the most out of your learning agile talent and are managing those resources strategically. Creative and sophisticated profile-job matching might even identify opportunities that could simultaneously deploy strengths and develop needs.

For teams, especially senior teams where the work is intense and the stakes are high, profiles can provide team members with valuable insight into how their styles might complement or collide.



Finally, at the organizational level, the available supply of each profile can be compared with the organization's strategic needs to zero in on potential talent gaps.

No matter the specific application, learning agility profiles allow an organization to look at its high potentials with a fresh perspective. Those insights will drive more informed decisions about career paths and ensure that the organization is putting its most valuable resources to optimal use.





**George Hallenbeck** is the vice president for product development with Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting.



**Victoria V. Swisher** is a Senior Intellectual Property Development Consultant with Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting.



**J. Evelyn Orr** is an Intellectual Property Development Consultant with Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting.

---

### About The Korn/Ferry Institute

The Korn/Ferry Institute generates forward-thinking research and viewpoints that illuminate how talent advances business strategy. Since its founding in 2008, the institute has published scores of articles, studies and books that explore global best practices in organizational leadership and human capital development.

### About Korn/Ferry International

Korn/Ferry International, with a presence throughout the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, is a premier global provider of talent management solutions. Based in Los Angeles, the firm delivers an array of solutions that help clients to attract, deploy, develop, and reward their talent.

Visit [www.kornferry.com](http://www.kornferry.com) for more information on the Korn/Ferry International family of companies, and [www.kornferryinstitute.com](http://www.kornferryinstitute.com) for thought leadership, intellectual property, and research.