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LEARNING AGILITY AS A KEY DRIVER OF LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL FOR TALENT IDENTIFICATION, PIPELINE DEVELOPMENT, AND SUCCESSION PLANNING IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Learning agility is a core element of any successful talent-management (TM) system. Decades of research in both academic and applied domains have demonstrated the critical role that learning from experience plays in predicting both leader performance and potential. Although many organizations recognize the importance of learning agility and are using it for different TM-related purposes, several issues in the extant literature can make it difficult for practitioners to find the right emphasis or the most useful application for their respective organizations. The purpose of this article is to address some of these challenges and provide greater clarity for applied psychologists working in this area by summarizing the literature and discussing the application of learning agility specifically as it relates to several core TM practices. First, we review the history and research on learning agility in the context of understanding current leadership performance and future capabilities. Next, we discuss the application of learning agility as it relates to key practice areas for TM professionals and consulting psychologists: (a) identifying high-potential talent at multiple career stages, (b) developing a longer-term pipeline of future leaders (i.e., leadership bench), and (c) building robust succession plans and slates of candidates for staffing senior-leadership roles (i.e., focusing on bench strength). We conclude with suggestions for future research.

What's It Mean? Implications for Consulting Psychology

This article focuses on the construct of learning agility and how it can be used to enhance the quality and scientific rigor of talent-management processes in organizations. Taking an internal-practice perspective, applications for learning agility in high-potential identification, leadership-pipeline development, and succession planning are discussed. Consulting psychologists should find this discussion helpful when seeking to improve leadership and talent-management efforts in organizational settings.

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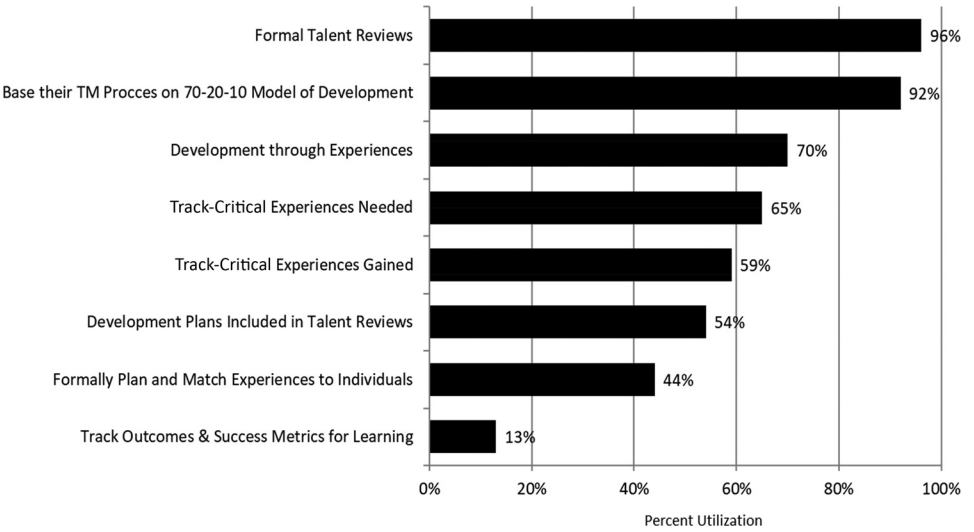
The ability and willingness to learn from experience and then apply those lessons to perform well in new and challenging leadership situations (Harvey & De Meuse, 2021)—or stated more simply, learning agility (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000)—are arguably core elements of any successful talent-management (TM) system (Church, 2021). Decades of research in both academic and applied domains have demonstrated the critical role that learning from experience plays in predicting both leader performance and potential (e.g., De Meuse, 2017, 2019; Dries et al., 2012; McCall, 1988; Silzer & Church, 2010). Indeed, most mainstream high-potential frameworks include the concept of learning in some capacity (e.g., Church & Silzer, 2014; Conger & Church, 2018; Finkelstein et al., 2018; Hoff & Burke, 2017; MacRae & Furnham, 2014; Silzer & Church, 2009; Thornton et al., 2017). It is also one of the few shared underlying values of both TM and organizational-development (OD) processes and interventions (Church et al., 2018).

For example, recent benchmark studies (e.g., Church & Rotolo, 2013; Church et al., 2015; McHenry & Church, 2018) of large organizations with a dedicated focus on development and robust TM systems have reported multiple ways in which feedback and learning from critical experiences (e.g., promotions, lateral moves or expanded accountabilities in-role, cross-functional and cross-business assignments, special projects and task forces, action learning, and externships) are imbedded in their processes for leadership and executive development (see Figure 1). Consolidating findings across studies, 92% of these organizations reported basing their talent philosophy on the

Figure 1

Key Findings From Benchmark Studies Concerning the Use of Critical Experiences



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classic 70-20-10 model of development (70% from experiences, 20% from feedback and coaching, and 10% from formal training). Further, 70% emphasize experiences to support leader development, with 54% formally embedding targeted learning experiences in talent-planning processes and 44% going as far as matching experiences to individual leaders (also known as *assignmentology*; see Lombardo & Eichinger, 2001). Together, these data suggest that the measurement and development of learning agility (or some variation of it) in leadership is central to most strategic TM efforts (Milani et al., 2021).

While many organizations recognize the importance of learning agility and are using it for different TM-related purposes, several issues in the extant literature can make it difficult for practitioners to find the right emphasis or the most useful application for their respective organizations. Over the past 20 years the concept of learning agility has been defined in a variety of ways with a host of different subdimensions and underlying facets (see De Meuse, 2017, for a review). There remains no singular unified or recognized definition of learning agility or agreement on how best to measure it (DeRue et al., 2012; Harvey & De Meuse, 2021; Silzer & Church, 2010), and some debate remains about whether it is distinct from other factors (DeRue et al., 2012; Thornton et al., 2017)—that is, whether it is a *metacompetency*. Although recent work (Dai & De Meuse, 2021) has been done to further refine a learning-agility framework that is grounded in theory and whose facets can more easily be operationalized and measured, there is more work to be done from an applied-consulting perspective. For example, which aspects of TM can benefit the most from the use of learning agility as an indicator (or behavioral manifestation) of future potential? In other words, what are the ways in which consulting psychologists can assist their internal and external clients in taking full advantage of the construct to improve their short- and long-term leadership pipelines? This is an area where consulting psychologists can leverage their expertise to help improve the client's processes and systems.

The purpose of this article is to summarize the literature and discuss the application of learning agility specifically as it relates to several core TM practices. For context, learning agility is defined here as "the ability and willingness to learn from experience, and then apply those lessons to perform well in new and challenging leadership situations" (Harvey & De Meuse, 2021). First, we review the history and research on learning agility in the context of understanding current leadership performance and future capabilities. Next, we discuss the application of learning agility as it relates to key practice areas for TM professionals and consulting psychologists: (a) identifying high-potential talent at multiple career stages, (b) developing a longer-term pipeline of future leaders (i.e., leadership bench), and (c) building robust succession plans and slates of candidates for staffing senior-leadership roles (i.e., focusing on bench strength). We conclude with suggestions for future research.

History of Learning Agility and Overview of Research

The origins of learning as an individual psychological variable used to evaluate successful in-role performance in organizational settings dates to assessments performed in the military and the assessment-center work in the 1980s at AT&T (Bray & Grant, 1966; De Meuse et al., 2010; Jeanneret & Silzer, 1998; Scott & Reynolds, 2010). It was the applied research done in the 1980s, however, as a collaboration between scientists at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and several key organizations including General Electric, American Express, and PepsiCo that ushered in the current era of "lessons of experience" (McCall et al., 1988; McCauley & McCall, 2014). In those studies, data collected from quantitative and qualitative sources on the careers of hundreds of leaders identified experiential learning as the key driver of success, whereas a lack of willingness to adapt and change was determined to be a primary derailer. These findings about the importance of challenging, stretch assignments for development (e.g., often experiences that include unfamiliar or increased responsibilities, change, managing across boundaries, or dealing with diversity; see McCall, 1998; Ohlott, 2004; Swisher et al., 2013; Yip & Wilson, 2010), combined with the right motivation or mind-set (e.g., Dweck, 2006), have been guiding human-resource (HR) and TM practices ever since. Subsequently, examples from organizations such as PepsiCo (Church & Waclawski, 2010), Siemens (Ruddy & Anand, 2010), and many others (e.g., McCauley & McCall, 2014; Silzer & Dowell,

2010) have shown the prominence that key experiences (or *critical experiences*, as many organizations refer to them as today) play in the way they think about and move individuals as part of talent processes.

The role of one's ability and willingness to learn from experiences in determining future leadership potential began soon after with early research on the identification of future international executives (McCall, 1994; Spreitzer et al., 1997), where it was operationalized as taking advantage of experiences offered (McCall, 1994). Based on data collected from 838 managers across multiple levels from six different firms, results indicated that learning agility significantly predicted the likelihood of being classified as a high-potential and this was above and beyond other factors (e.g., general competency ratings). Using a different measure of learning agility, Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) found similar results in their study of over 200 manager-employee pairs across six companies where learning agility was predictive of manager ratings of potential regardless of level, gender, age, or line-versus-staff functions. These authors all generally concluded that learning agility can be used as a means of assessing future leadership potential.

However, it was not until 2000 that the term *learning agility* was coined by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), two of the original researchers involved in the CCL research. The concept was initially defined using four different facets: people agility, mental agility, change agility, and results agility. These facets were commercialized into various self-rating and multirater tools for feedback (e.g., viaEDGE, Choices) and used for leadership development and decision-making in organizational settings (De Meuse, 2017; Swisher et al., 2013). Over the years, this framework and the measurement tools associated with it have continued to evolve, and other models have emerged such as the TALENTx7 (De Meuse, 2017) and the Burke Learning Agility Inventory (LAI; Burke et al., 2016; Hoff & Burke, 2017). Dai and De Meuse (2021) and Harvey and De Meuse (2021) have also presented theoretical models of learning agility.

With the increase in attention on the concept of learning agility and the emergence of several competitive models and measurement tools, there has been accompanying growth in empirical research about its relationship to both performance and potential. Reviews of both the current academic (De Meuse et al., 2010; DeRue et al., 2012; Dries et al., 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2018; Silzer & Church, 2009, 2010) and practitioner literatures (e.g., Conger & Church, 2018; Hoff & Burke, 2017; McCauley & McCall, 2014; Swisher et al., 2013) have suggested there is considerable agreement that individuals who have and leverage the capacity to learn from their surroundings and experiences have the potential to become more successful in the long term.

Recent meta-analyses by De Meuse (2017, 2019) have reviewed these findings in depth, while also highlighting the research challenges that remain. Based on 20 studies using a variety of different instruments, and data collected from almost 5,000 employees, De Meuse (2019) reported the overall relationship between learning agility and leader success (defined largely by managerial ratings of performance or potential) as $r = .47$, $p < .001$. Breaking the results down further, he reported a correlation of $r = .47$ across those studies measuring performance, and $r = .48$ for the studies that included leadership potential as an outcome variable (both significant at $p < .001$). Similar positive findings have been reported in technical reports by others as well (e.g., Burke, 2018) with a number of different samples. In short, even across different instruments and models of learning agility, the data point to a strong relationship between learning agility and managerial ratings of performance and potential. Whether this is called *learning agility*, *learning ability*, (see Silzer & Church, 2009), *learning capability*, or *catalytic learning* (see Conger & Church, 2018), the apparent utility from a TM and leadership-development perspective remains the same.

Learning Agility as a Key Component of TM

In view of the fundamental nature of the research describing how successful executives learn from their experiences, and the increasing empirical evidence about the relationship between learning agility and both performance and potential ratings, it is not surprising that leaders and HR professionals have embraced the concept. Recent benchmark research conducted with top development organizations has established that learning agility is often a focus of assessments used for

identifying, developing, and confirming leadership potential (see Church & Rotolo, 2016; Church et al., 2015; McHenry & Church, 2018). Specifically, 56% of the companies surveyed reported incorporating learning agility in their assessment batteries for identifying or confirming high-potential talent, and 51% reported leveraging it as part of their processes for assessing executive talent (see Figure 2).

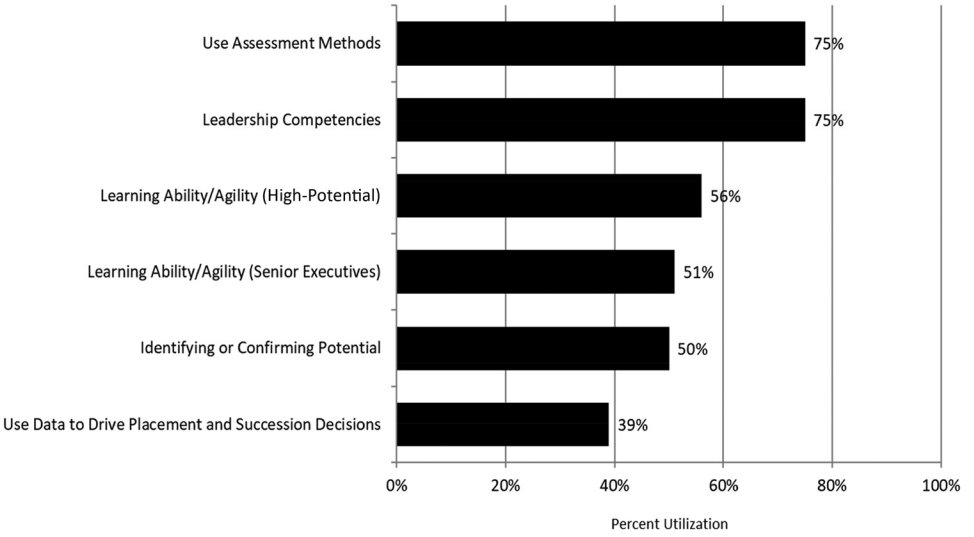
Many current models of leadership potential (e.g., Church & Silzer, 2014; Conger & Church, 2018; Finkelstein et al., 2018; MacRae & Furnham, 2014; Silzer & Church, 2009) conceptualize learning agility as one facet rather than the sole indicator. However, from an applied-TM perspective, learning agility can be used in connection with a variety of other tools across the employee life cycle. In the following paragraphs we explore three key areas where learning agility can be applied to improve the identification and development of future leaders for succession planning and long-term pipeline development.

Future-Potential Identification

One of the most promising approaches based on the original research on the lessons of experience and on more recent studies (including meta-analytic findings; see De Meuse, 2019) is to leverage the concept of learning agility as part of a suite of tools designed to identify future leadership potential in early to midcareer employees. As an important facet of many potential models, integrating a measure of learning agility or some form of the capability should help increase the predictive power of identifying those employees with greater capacity to learn and be high-potential. Given that 64%

Figure 2

Key Findings From Benchmark Studies Concerning Concerning High-Potential Talent Identification and Succession



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of organizations benchmarked rely on managerial judgment of potential (often "calibrated" in talent discussions) based on someone's perceived ability to perform effectively at two levels above one's current role (Church & Waclawski, 2010; Church et al., 2015; Silzer & Church, 2009), incorporating actual learning-agility measures into reviews would provide clear value both in terms of accuracy and consistency.

This distinction between high-potential identification processes in organizations that are based solely on managerial judgments (i.e., "designated potential') versus measurement-based approaches using validated psychological tools (i.e., "assessed potential") is an important one for applied psychologists to address in their consulting efforts with line clients and HR professionals (Church et al., 2021). Although rarely studied empirically because designated potential reflects an internal classification that is highly confidential in nature and often not even transparent to employees (Church et al., 2015), it is a critical intervention point for demonstrating the return on investment (ROI) of data-based insights on constructs such as learning agility. The implications of being designated (or classified) as a high-potential based solely on perceptions versus scientific measures can have sweeping consequences for organizations in terms of leadership bench, cultural dynamics, and business success overtime. Recent applied research by Church and colleagues (Church et al., 2021) provided support to this argument in a study of 9,784 early-career professionals in PepsiCo's Leadership Assessment and Development (LeAD) Program. Their study illustrates the value of using an approach that employs multitrait multimethod assessments that embed the concept of learning agility in predicting a several notable outcomes over time such as promotions, positive reactions, and leadership buy-in (Church et al., 2021). Results such as these point to the value of adding psychological assessment data to the identification of potential above and beyond performance metrics, which has been part of a long-standing debate in the use of "9-Box" frameworks of potential as well (e.g., Church, 2018; Church & Waclawski, 2010).

As with any tool or construct, targeted validation studies are needed for any organization desiring to use learning agility as part of their talent-identification suite. It is particularly important at lower levels in the organization (e.g., with early-career professionals) where an assessment tool might be the only real source of objective information beyond the immediate manager's perception of potential (Church & Rotolo, 2016). The best approach here is to create a validated predictive index or composite metric of future potential that is informed by behavioral measures of learning agility along with other important skills or constructs, rather than using any single assessment on its own (Church et al., 2021; Rotolo et al., 2018). As an example, preliminary research has perhaps surprisingly shown that learning agility and intelligence are relatively distinct from one another (e.g., Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2002; De Meuse et al., 2012). Thus, assessing both may result in predicting success to a higher degree than either alone (more research is needed to confirm incremental validity; De Meuse, 2019).

Further, it is important to recognize that the presence, absence, or degree of an employee's learning agility should not be the end-state of the assessment but rather used as an indicator of future capability. In other words, having higher levels of learning agility might be an indicator of someone with greater potential, but this data point needs to be factored in with other indicators and variables. As TM practitioners and consulting psychologists, it is critical that we help our respective organizations and other HR professionals understand the role that learning agility (and other dimensions of human behavior) plays in the process of career progression and success, rather than use the concept itself as the sole differentiator. Although more research needs to be done on the long-term impact of learning agility, not to mention a full consideration of the organizational and contextual factors that play a role in promotions over time (DeRue et al., 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2018), the inclusion of some measure of learning agility as part of an early-identification model seems highly valuable.

Leadership-Pipeline Development

Although there remains some debate about whether learning agility is an innate capability, a developable skill, or a combination of both (Church, 2021; Harvey & De Meuse, 2021), decades of broader learning research and evaluation studies in the training literature (e.g., Kirkpatrick &

Kirkpatrick, 2006) indicate that those employees who apply new knowledge and skills on the job are more likely to change behaviors and increase their performance. Stated plainly, employees who can learn and adapt are more likely to be higher performers over time.

Given that learning agility can be thought of as a metacompetency as discussed above (see De Meuse et al., 2010), it is likely that certain elements are trait-based (e.g., general cognitive and personality attributes) and others are behaviors or skills that can be enhanced over time (e.g., via environmental scanning, practice, and reflection). Consistent with this perspective, in the context of the Leadership Potential BluePrint (Church & Silzer, 2014; Silzer & Church, 2009), learning has been defined as a growth dimension. As such, it represents a stable characteristic building off the foundational principles of cognitive skills and personality characteristics yet is also an individual capability that can be developed throughout someone's career. Thus, learning agility would likely be a useful component for any developmental agenda, particularly considering the call for learning organizations and learning cultures (e.g., Garvin et al., 2008; Senge, 2006), and the concept of lifelong learning (or catalytic learning as defined by Conger & Church, 2018) in general. The best approach for leadership-pipeline development is to focus on those aspects of learning agility that are developable rather than trait-based to support enhanced coaching effectiveness (Church, 2014b).

Feedback and reflection are central to the concept of learning agility, as noted above, as they promote greater self-awareness (Adler & Neiman, 2021; Anseel & Ong, 2021; Bracken et al., 2016; Church, 2000; De Meuse et al., 2010; Nowack & Mashihi, 2012). Many models of learning agility also place explicit emphasis on the role of self-awareness in ensuring a reflective process (Dai & De Meuse, 2021; De Meuse, 2017; Hoff & Burke, 2017; Mitchinson & Morris, 2014), and research dating back 25 years has demonstrated that higher self-awareness is a differentiator of performance and potential (e.g., Church, 1997, 2000; Lawrence et al., 2018; Tekleab et al., 2008). Recently conducted internal research on PepsiCo's newest leadership-potential framework, the GREAT5 (Church & Ezama, 2020; see Figure 3), is consistent with these external findings. Specifically, results show that higher scores on the self-focused elements of learning agility embedded in the model (e.g., self-regulation, self-reflection, and feedback-seeking; see Dai & De Meuse, 2021, for a framework) are among the strongest predictors of future potential ($r = .34$, $p < .001$).[1]

These patterns are observed at all levels of management where the model has been applied via PepsiCo's LeAD practice (Church, 2019; Church et al., 2021; Church & Rotolo, 2016); however, the strongest effects were observed among midcareer talent. Therefore, targeted feedback (e.g., a 360-degree-feedback measure or self-assessment) followed by comprehensive development-planning and coaching efforts is perhaps one of the best ways to apply learning agility to development efforts. This approach is consistent with the models for design and application offered by various multirater measures of learning agility currently available (e.g., Burke et al., 2016; De Meuse, 2017).

Although targeted feedback tools might be used in a stand-alone manner (e.g., via an annual feedback program), the guidance for internal and external consulting practitioners is to ensure they are integrated with other measures (constructs) within the broader context of TM, leadership-development, or executive-assessment efforts (e.g., Church, 2019, 2021; Church et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2017). The latter approach also affords organizations the option of including learning modules on the concept of learning agility and opportunities to practice new behaviors to break old patterns and develop automaticity of new behaviors (Harvey & Prager, 2021). Given that 360-degree-feedback measures can be used effectively under the right conditions for both development and talent decision-making processes (Bracken et al., 2016; Church et al., 2019), it seems prudent to use them to assess learning agility as well, at least at the behavioral level. The key is understanding exactly which behaviors (and based on what model) to measure.

Because the types of tools available to measure learning agility range in level of complexity, as well as expertise and expense required to deliver, broad-based development can be more difficult to do depending on the size and scale of the company. In addition, unless there is a cultural mandate to specifically enhance learning agility or learning capability the focus may be lost to other more pressing cultural agendas (e.g., a broader set of leadership competencies or cultural indicators). For those

[1] Based on unpublished internal research conducted by the authors.

Figure 3
PepsiCo's Model of Leadership Potential

organizations where the scale is beyond a TM or OD teams' ability to manage feedback individually, surrogates or composite scores for learning agility via other assessments (such as standard personality measures with learning subcomponents) might be warranted. Many organizations take the approach of integrating key behaviors reflecting a host of different factors (that could easily include learning agility) into their existing broader feedback models (Bracken et al., 2016). For example, PepsiCo has a long-standing history over the past 30 years of embedding the construct of learning in its leadership frameworks (Alziari, 2001; Church et al., 2018; Church & Waclawski, 2010; Oliver et al., 2009; Tichy & DeRose, 1996) dating back to some of the earliest thinking on "muscle-building the organization" through experiences (Pearson, 1987).

As noted above, the organization's most recently implemented model, the GREAT5, embeds learning agility throughout the different constructs of growth, relationships, execution, agility, and thinking (Church & Ezama, 2020). The 360-degree-feedback tool that accompanies the model is designed to tap these behaviors at different levels of leadership and is supported by other forms of measurement including trait-based components (via a personality tool) as well as experienced-based tools (i.e., a simulation that places leaders in novel and complex challenges that mirror real organizational challenges two leadership levels [in the structural hierarchy] above the participant's current role). As Church et al. (2021) have noted, focusing on internal language of leadership competencies (with learning agility incorporated rather than being uniquely identified) affords greater adoption of the behavioral components because it reflects the cultural nuances of how those aspects are expected to be manifested in a given organizational setting.

Another option for using learning agility to accelerate leadership-pipeline development, which has its own set of debates in practice, is to include learning efforts and outcomes as part of the formal performance-management process (e.g., as suggested by Hoff & Burke, 2017). Performance management is one of the most powerful levers for promoting behavioral change (Bracken & Church, 2013; Pulakos, 2009; Pulakos et al., 2015). Good organizational-change practice would indicate that broader systems need to be fully aligned (Burke & Litwin, 1992) and that applied psychologists and OD and TM professionals need to be aware of what is being measured and rewarded versus simply espoused, communicated, or trained on specific competencies for their own inherent

value. For example, if learning objectives are incorporated into annual or ongoing performance evaluations, employees are more likely to execute those even when their own internal motivation to do so may be limited. From the performance-management perspective, accountability becomes the primary driver of behavior.

At the same time, there are potential downsides to formally embedding learning objectives into performance evaluations—for example: (a) the possibility of creating a negative perception of learning because of inadequate time or managerial support, (b) increased expectations of greater reward or opportunities on the part of employees as a result of completing their learning objectives, (c) limited organizational resources to meet increases in demand for building learning-agility capabilities, or (d) the establishment of a check-the-box learning agenda without any meaningful outcomes. It is likely one of the reasons why (along with the concern over learning agility as a trait vs. state dimension) only 13% of top development companies formally link learning progress to their performance-management programs or hold managers accountable for the learning objectives of their staff (McHenry & Church, 2018). It is certainly an area where future research could benefit practice.

Further, including an objective to develop earning agility could be even more challenging and difficult to measure without targeted tools before and after. Appropriate resources to develop new knowledge, skills, and behaviors to support the change is also necessary. Just because someone has learning objectives as part of their formal reviews does not ensure they will learn how to learn from the process or enhance their ability to learn from future experiences.

Finally, the research is not clear on what specific elements of learning agility are most useful in different contexts (McCauley & Yost, 2021). For example, it may be the case that different elements of learning agility become more or less important at different levels of leadership. Of the nine different facets of learning agility identified by Dai and De Meuse (2021), internal research at PepsiCo using personality assessments, validation evidence from the GREAT5 leadership model, and extensive observation via senior-leader interviews suggest that there are different facets that maintain emphasis across an employee's career as well as those that change over time (Church & Ezama, 2019). Specifically, although core personality dimensions remained consistent overtime, other aspects of learning agility (e.g., derailers, motives, and behavioral work-arounds) do show evidence of change during one's career (Church et al., 2016). Internal research at PepsiCo has tended to show that in general the application components of learning agility (see Dai & De Meuse, 2021) are slightly more important (i.e., more predictive of performance and potential) earlier in one's career whereas ability components of learning agility have greater importance later in one's career. If we look a layer deeper, however, there are some nuances. Specifically, we see that unconventional thinking (an ability component that involves questioning convention and experimenting with new methods) and flexibility (an application component that involves interpersonal flexibility and examining situations from multiple perspectives) remain important across the employee life cycle, whereas self-regulation (e.g., mindful and deliberate thinking and behaving) is particularly important in midcareer leaders, and social astuteness (e.g., being social sensitive, demonstrating empathy, and instilling confidence) is particularly important at more senior levels. In other words, leveraging learning agility for employee-development efforts broadly, while likely very useful, might be most useful when targeted to the development needs of certain populations.

Leadership-Succession Benches

A third way learning agility can play an important role in TM practices is for identifying (or slating) and selecting candidates for succession, particularly at senior levels. In this context, the measurement or formal assessment of learning agility could be included in a suite of tools as a critical indicator of a leader with the ability to adapt to the most stressful and complex sets of roles in a corporation (e.g., at the C-suite level or C-suite-minus-one level). Given that the early research on executives demonstrated that the absence of learning agility led to derailing outcomes (McCall et al., 1988), and other models of potential emphasize learning skills as critical at the highest levels of the organization (e.g., catalytic learning as described by Conger & Church, 2018), the inclusion of a measure of learning agility in some form could be instrumental in increasing the probability of

effective succession. For example, Church et al. (2017) reported significant relationships between the application of learning from an executive-assessment process with increased leadership skills via behavioral ratings gathered 12 to 18 months after the feedback and coaching across managers, peers, and direct reports ($r = .53$, $p < .01$).

At later career stages, however, there is also likely the need to understand motivation as well, because many leaders either stop learning when they achieve a certain level of success or do not want to engage in the behaviors necessary to achieve the next level (Conger & Church, 2018). In addition to application of learning as noted above, Church et al. (2017) also showed that when leaders participating in the process demonstrated a learning-oriented, growth mind-set (Dweck, 2006) it also predicted improved leadership capability over time ($r = .40$, $p < .05$). In view of the prevailing assumption that many senior leaders are resistant to feedback and change because their prior behaviors have made them successful to date (e.g., Charan et al., 2001; Goldsmith, 2010), learning orientation and learning agility do appear to matter even in more senior succession contexts.

Relatedly, an important element of learning agility to consider as part of the process for talent review and the succession pipeline is the determination of whether a leader actually learns from experiences and applies those learnings to new ones. Although managers often cite challenging assignments as central to their professional development (e.g., Van Velsor et al., 2013), research lacks sufficient clarity and depth to understand the exact role that learning agility plays. It would be important to understand if learning agility (or which facet or facets of learning agility) can be viewed as a predictor (Dai & Hezlett, 2017; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000), a moderator (Adler & Neiman, 2021), an outcome (Dai et al., 2013; Hallenbeck & Santana, 2019), or a process (DeRue et al., 2012; McCauley & McCall, 2014; McHenry & Church, 2018; Mitchinson et al., 2012).

Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge that senior-succession slates are often different from final placement decisions (Church, 2014a). Because succession slates are typically generated using a gradated model of "readiness" (e.g., "ready now," "ready in 1–2 years," "ready in 3–5 years," or "ready in 5+"), the further away the individual talent is from potential selection into a given role, the more likely they will need to demonstrate to the organization their ability to learn and apply learnings from planned developmental assignments to move up the readiness scale.

Although creating learning objectives when onboarding someone to a new role or imbedding learning goals in performance-management reviews can be useful, it is extremely difficult to assess with any degree of accuracy whether someone developed their learning agility in these contexts. This might not be an issue if learning agility is defined purely as an individual trait, but the difficulty is inherent in the use of critical experiences to test or build greater potential. As mentioned above, internal research at PepsiCo showed that the application component (e.g., self-regulatory behaviors such as mindfulness and deliberate thinking and behavior) of learning agility is the strongest predictor of differentiated performance ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) and potential ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) among midcareer leaders at PepsiCo. Indeed, only 44% of the companies benchmarked by Church and colleagues reported formally matching/tailoring learning experiences to the specific skills individual leaders needed to develop, and even fewer (13%) reported actually tracking the outcomes of learning experiences (McHenry & Church, 2018). This raises important questions for research and practice about how we assess learning-agility-related outcomes of new assignments (see McCauley & Yost, 2021, for a review of the literature).

Further, while success in a new role can be defined in many ways (e.g., performance ratings, tenure in the assignment, or promotion out of the assignment), political and organizational-culture forces can impede learning and are often overlooked or minimized from a TM perspective. As an example, planned or unplanned movement in the senior-leadership ranks (e.g., hiring new leaders from outside with a different perspective on talent) or new organizational structures and shifting business priorities all influence the process. Although leaders can adapt and learn from these new dynamics, if specific learning experiences are part of a planned succession process based on a list of desired "critical experiences," then the development emphasis on learning may be disrupted.

The final consideration in using learning agility for succession planning, particularly at the senior-most levels of an organization, elicits questions that internal line leaders and HR professionals can and do sometimes raise in talent-planning discussions. The first of these is: "If (designated)

potential is defined as being successful at increasingly complex and higher-level roles, why do we need a formal assessment of learning agility or leadership potential at all?" A second question is: "Why cannot we just operate under the simple framework that a leader who thrives is a high-potential, someone who survives with average performance is a solid player, and someone who fails should be managed out of the organization?" The challenge with this seemingly legitimate approach is that although it is intuitive (and eliminates the cost of assessments in the short term), it is also based solely on current performance. Performance is a key gatekeeper variable, but it is not by itself fully predictive of future success (Church et al., 2015; Silzer & Church, 2009, 2010). By adding a more rigorous data-based approach using a formal assessment suite of leadership potential vis-à-vis learning agility and other constructs, there is a significantly greater likelihood of being predictive rather than descriptive in the organization's approach to high-potential talent. This is the argument behind the call to change the popular 9-Box framework in use today (Church, 2018; Church et al., 2015, 2021; Church & Waclawski, 2010).

In other words, replacing the current use of performance ratings with assessed potential vis-à-vis constructs such as learning agility and comparing that empirical data to perceptions of designated potential will yield far better talent development and decision-making outcomes.

Future Directions for Practice and Research

Clearly, the concept of learning agility plays an important role in understanding and predicting leadership potential and performance. Although the concept is still relatively new in terms of industrial-organizational psychology (De Meuse, 2017; Harvey & De Meuse, 2021), significant progress has been made in demonstrating the relationships among learning agility and individual outcomes. There are several areas, however, where the field could benefit from additional theory and research from the perspective of TM and consulting psychology.

First, as noted above, a key challenge from a theoretical perspective with practice implications reflects the question of whether learning agility is a trait, a learnable behavior, or an outcome following a set of experiences (Church, 2021; Harvey & Prager, 2021; Mitchinson et al., 2012; Rotolo et al., 2018). Given the retrospective nature of some of the original research in this area, and the concurrent nature of most of the present studies, it is difficult to know where consulting practitioners should focus from a TM perspective. Should senior leaders and HR practitioners emphasize (a) identifying talent with learning agility, (b) developing said skills and behaviors by taking risks with new experiences, or (c) focusing on the processes that enable a more conducive learning environment (DeRue et al., 2012; Harvey & De Meuse, 2021)?

Relatedly, even though internal research at PepsiCo has suggested that different facets of learning agility are more or less important across the employee life cycle (see above), it is not clear which elements or facets of learning agility (e.g., application components vs. ability components; see Dai & De Meuse, 2021) or more nuanced criteria (e.g., general leadership potential vs. destination potential) should be emphasized across different levels of leadership or across different TM applications. Although a few studies in the past 20 years have included more hard metrics (such as promotions and performance at the next level), and recent work has been done to identify a more precise and measurable framework (Dai & De Meuse, 2021), the literature is generally lacking in a long-term data-based view. What we do know, however, is that assessment of potential (using the Leadership Potential BluePrint, which has learning agility as one of six key components) does uniquely predict future success in terms of promotions and ratings of potential 2 to 3 years out beyond simply performance in the current role based on a study of early-career professionals (Church et al., 2021). This finding is important in that both measures are useful and both types of data are needed to identify talent and build the leadership pipeline.

From a practice perspective, it would be useful to see a single unified model of learning agility that is linked to other critical concepts (such as personality, potential, and leadership), with all the various measures available that enable internal and external practitioners to choose the best one for their TM purposes. Highlighting the contextual variables in a manner more amenable to organizational-development and culture-change interventions to improve the broader system of support for

feedback and learning through self-awareness would also be helpful (Church et al., 2018). Such a unifying solution across TM, OD, and even broader HR-development efforts also could benefit theory in this area and quiet the debate about the inherent attributes and the developable components. The model presented by DeRue et al. (2012) and the nomological net presented by Harvey and De Meuse (2021) are compelling but still do not fully solve for the difficulty in operationalization and application in an organizational context.

Finally, from a measurement perspective, it would be helpful see alternative forms of assessment that can help both researchers and practitioners to tap learning agility in theoretically and empirically sounds ways. To date, many tools measuring learning agility have been based on survey questionnaires—either via self-assessments or types of 360-degree feedback (e.g., see Boyce & Boyce, 2021, for a review of existing measures). Although some organizations have experimented with alternative methodology such as structure interviews and even simulations to assess learning outcomes and capabilities, there is an opportunity for researchers and consulting firms to continue to expand their techniques and research to new models and tools (e.g., Scott & Reynolds, 2010). It is well established that self-assessments are often subject to biases including social desirability and faking behavior (though some tools do include response checks such as the TALENTx7), and these concerns are only exacerbated from a TM perspective when employees know that their data will be used to inform talent decisions about future potential or placement on slates or into new roles. Thus, the development, refinement, and utilization of more objective measures of learning agility can be an effective method of minimizing bias that plagues manager ratings of potential (i.e., reflecting only designated potential). This is an area where applied consulting psychologists can play a critical role in assisting organizations to build more valid and bias-free TM and development processes.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, it should be clear from the discussion above that the construct of learning agility is indeed critical for understanding, identifying, and developing high-potential leaders in global TM systems. The concept of learning from experiences and being able to apply those learnings adaptively to new scenarios is a hallmark of learning agility, and it has been shown to predict performance, potential, and promotions over time across a variety of applied settings. In its various forms, the concept is central to other models of potential as well (e.g., the Leadership Potential BluePrint) and has found its way into the majority of formal assessment-and-development efforts for both early-career and senior executives in top development companies per recent benchmark studies. Although the field has yet to fully coalesce on a single definition and preferred method of measurement, and further research is still needed to determine causal directionality, the utility of learning agility for a variety of TM programs and processes is clear. With appropriate validation in an organizational setting, learning agility reflects a powerful component for determining future leadership potential.

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