Industrial and Organizational Psychology
PERSPECTIVES ON SCIENCE AND PRACTICE

Industrial and Organizational Psychology, **5** (2012), 280–315.
Copyright © 2012 Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. 1754-9426/12

COMMENTARIES

Leadership Development: Exploring, Clarifying, and Expanding Our Understanding of Learning Agility

KENNETH P. DE MEUSE, GUANGRONG DAI, AND VICTORIA V. SWISHER
Korn/Ferry International

ROBERT W. EICHINGER AND MICHAEL M. LOMBARDO

We read the DeRue, Ashford, and Myers (2012) article with much interest. As a company, Lominger (purchased by Korn/Ferry in 2006) has conducted research on learning agility for nearly 20 years. Although much of this research has been internal in the form of technical reports and whitepapers, we also have published and presented our findings in a number of venues (De Meuse, 2011; De Meuse & Dai, 2011; De Meuse, Dai, & Hallenbeck, 2010; Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004; Eichinger, Lombardo, & Capretta, 2010). Our clients have purchased our learning agility assessments since the mid-1990s. Within the past few years, we have observed a significant interest in using learning agility to identify and develop high potential talent. We find that many organizations express interest in measuring learning agility and employing it as a talent management tool, even though they have limited understanding of what it is. Consequently, we were delighted to see that the journal of *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* devoted a serious effort to defining, understanding, and measuring this important construct.

Overall, we found the DeRue et al. article to be a positive step in this direction. It supported a recent journal article that we had published entitled, ''Learning Agility: A Construct Whose Time Has Come'' (De Meuse et al., 2010). It is our hope that the scholarly investigation of learning agility will increase our understanding of the construct so it is applied appropriately in the management of talent. There are many areas where we are aligned with the authors' point of view. However, we would like to highlight several key areas where this article and our research and views differ significantly. Specifically, we address the following three areas: (a) conceptualization and definition of learning agility, (b) the measurement of it, and (c) empirical evidence examining its relationship to leadership success.

Conceptualization and Definition of Learning Agility

DeRue et al. raised two major issues pertaining to the conceptualization and definition of learning agility: (a) the general breadth of the construct itself and (b) how the existing definition of *learning agility*—conceptually and operationally—differs from the traditional concept of *learning ability*. The authors contended that the term of learning agility has become a ''catch-all'' phrase referring to virtually everything related to learning from experience. They claim the current definition is synonymous with the ability to learn. On

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kenneth P. De Meuse.
E-mail: demeukp@uwec.edu
Address: Korn/Ferry International, Minneapolis, MN 55416

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the basis of their reasoning, the authors proposed a narrower definition of learning agility that focuses directly on *speed and flexibility*. Conceptualized in this manner, the construct of learning agility becomes solely a component of the ability to learn in general.

The Bandwidth of the Construct

Psychological test developers face many difficulties when creating reliable, valid, and usable measures. One of the challenges relates to the bandwidth of the construct to be assessed. Unlike DeRue et al.'s narrow definition, we posit a broad conceptualization of learning agility. Our existing model considers learning agility as a metacompetency (De Meuse et al., 2010), an integrative construct that subsumes a number of more narrowly defined and specific behavioral elements (Norton, 2010). This broad and multidimensional definition reflects the demanding requirements of developmental experiences. McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, and Morrow (1994) identified 15 characteristics of developmental challenges that can be organized into five categories: (a) job transition, (b) creating change, (c) high level responsibility, (d) nonauthority relationships, and (e) obstacles. Many other studies have confirmed McCauley et al.'s findings. For example, Snell (1992) illustrated how ''hard knocks'' in experiential learning at work are a key channel for personal and moral development. Bennis and Thomas (2002) described learning from experience as transformational events or ''crucibles.'' The crucible experience is a trial or a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forces leaders to question who they are and what matters most to them. Day (2000) pointed out the importance of leadership development within a social context with a focus on the interaction between an individual (the leader) and the social and organizational environment. This contextual view of leadership development suggests that experiential learning has both affective and social dimensions (Cope, 2005).

Fundamental to leadership development is the increased capability to handle complexity. Hooijberg, Hunt, and Dodge (1997) delineated two types of complexity: (a) social complexity and (b) cognitive complexity. Social complexity refers to an individual's capacity to differentiate the personal and relational aspects of a social situation and integrate them in a manner that results in an enhanced understanding or changed action–intention valence. The underlying assumption of the cognitive complexity perspective is that cognitively complex individuals process information differently and perform certain tasks better than individuals who are not as cognitively complex because they use more categories or dimensions to discriminate among stimuli and can see more commonalities among these categories and dimensions. Note here, Hooijberg et al. did not mention the speed but the quality of information processing.

A review of the literature reveals that learning from experiences requires one to deal with novelty, adversity, complexity, difficulty, diversity, uncertainty, accountability, and nonauthority—all of which are inherent in leadership development. Development requires both learning new skills and relinquishing old habits (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Freedman, 1998) and involves the continuous evolvement of self-identity (Day & Harrison, 2007). A narrow definition of learning agility such as the one provided by DeRue et al. may have the advantage of conceptual clarity but provides limited practical value. Organizations need help assessing and identifying individuals who are the most likely to benefit from developmental job assignments, both by learning from the experience and subsequently applying that learning to new assignments. Thus, the learning themes we are looking for are closely tied to the characteristics of challenging developmental experiences. We anticipate that individuals with certain personal attributes will be able to handle these challenges. DeRue et al.'s definition of learning agility deviates from this intention. By focusing only on speed and flexibility, we cannot be sure whether individuals

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

selected as high potentials will be able to learn from the challenging job assignments. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, speed is not the defining characteristic of individuals who learn from experience. Less cognitively complex individuals may be able to make connections between categories as quickly as cognitively complex individuals in certain situations but certainly not as reliably across many different situations.

Learning Agility Versus Learning Ability

To articulate how our conceptualization of learning agility differs from the traditional view of learning ability, we start with the distinction between the *ability to learn from experience* and *how individuals learn*. The scholarly literature provides many learning theories to explain or model how individuals learn, such as Kolb's (1984) model of learning cycle, Honey and Mumford's (1992) learning style, Mumford's (1996) learning approach, Flavell's (1979) metacognitive theory, and Saban, Killion, and Green's (1994) typology of reflection in learning. To convince organizational leaders to practice adult experiential learning for their leadership development programs, scholars need to take several conceptual steps. Dominick, Squires, and Cervone (2010) articulate three. Here, we revise and expand Dominick et al.'s list to six steps.

The first step is to demonstrate that leadership is not a fixed personal factor. The second step is to highlight the impact of experience on leadership development. The third step is to develop a model to assess and identify individuals who are willing and able to learn from experience. A fourth step is to understand the *when* and *what* issues (Hezlett, 2010). Specifically, we need to help individuals understand *when* to learn *what* competencies are required at different stages of their careers. A fifth step is to match developmental experiences with competencies so that organizations understand how to develop individuals using job assignments. Lombardo and Eichinger (2001) coined the term ''assignmentology'' for this purpose. Finally, models (e.g., learning processes, learning styles, and learning strategies) can be developed to help individuals learn from experience. This process also includes integrating experiential learning with other HR functions such as performance management, feedback, mentoring, coaching, and training.

Overall, the assessment of individuals' learning agility and the development of a learning model targets different steps of the work. The former has important implications for assessment and selection. In contrast, the latter affects how organizations design programs and facilitate an individual's learning. This difference explains why we use *learning agility* rather than *learning ability*. Learning ability traditionally has been researched within the cognitive approach to explain the mental process of learning. For instance, when Derry and Murphy (1986) reviewed learning ability, they focused on learning strategy—the collection of mental tactics employed by an individual in a particular learning situation to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge or skills. Learning strategies are not what we intend to assess. In addition, we use learning agility instead of learning ability to emphasize the emotional and social dimensions of learning. Ability often is interpreted as intelligence. Yet, the extant literature clearly has found little relationship between the construct of learning agility and intelligence (cf. Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2002).

The Measurement of Learning Agility

With regard to the assessment of learning agility, the focal article raised several issues pertaining to the Korn/Ferry Choices Architect® assessment. We address some of the major issues in this section.

Content Validity

On the basis of their conceptualization and definition of learning agility, DeRue et al. reported that many of the items in the Choices Architect® did not appear to be measuring learning agility. Therefore,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the authors questioned the content validity of the assessment. This concern is built on flawed logic. This assessment was not developed to measure learning speed and flexibility—key features in the definition of learning agility proposed by these authors. Assessing the content validity of the instrument with respect to their definition is not justifiable.

We want to further point out that learning in general can happen at different conscious levels. Sometimes, individuals develop as a natural outcome of solving problems, without recognizing the learning process (Mumford, 1996). In fact, there are situations when individuals do not want to be identified as learners because such naming creates professional or institutional tensions and associations of being a novice or a person who has yet to be accepted as a fully functioning worker (Boud & Solomon, 2003). Consequently, some scholars have recommended asking people questions they can answer, which are indirectly indicative of their learning (Mumford & Honey, 1992). These views invalidate any method to judge the content validity of an instrument by assessing whether items are explicit manifestations of learning behavior.

Consistent with our definition and conceptualization of learning agility, themes such as ''cool transactor,'' ''taking the heat,'' and ''light touch'' are important dimensions of learning agility. They address the emotional and social facets of learning agility. It is true that the grouping of the items was derived empirically from the results of factor analyses. However, the development of these items was based on the developers' many years of research examining how executives learn and develop on the job (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Lombardo and Eichinger (1989) identified different types of job experiences that were likely to result in personal development. This knowledge framed their view of individuals who can successfully learn from these job experiences and is reflected in the Choices Architect® assessment.

The Application of Learning

Another concern raised by DeRue et al. was the distinction between learning and the application of learning. The authors asserted that including an application component in the definition confounds learning with performance outcomes. In our view, learning activities of leaders emerge in response to meaningful opportunities and problems. Learning and doing are inseparable in experiential learning. Being willing to apply the lessons with uncertain outcomes and consequences is critical. It is only through action that true learning occurs (Daudelin, 1996). We further believe that the successful application of learning in tough and novel situations is one of the most important indicators of learning agility. Cope (2005) similarly emphasized the importance of the ability to extrapolate and ''bring forward'' one's learning from critical events to new situations, incidents, and experiences. DeRue et al. identified some items that appear to capture performance rather than learning activities. Again, these behaviors are indirectly indicative of individuals' learning (Mumford & Honey, 1992). Phrases such as ''managing diversity,'' ''without relying on authority,'' and ''first-time conditions'' describe the challenges that individuals will need to deal with to learn from critical incidents.

Other Psychometric Issues

DeRue et al. also criticized the Choices Architect® assessment for containing a number of double-barreled items, making the evaluation of an individual's learning agility difficult. We recognize that the psychometric properties of this measure need to be improved. As an organization, we began reconstructing the Choices Architect® measure in 2010. In addition to the four factors of learning agility measured by this assessment, we added a ''self-awareness'' factor. The importance of self-awareness, reflection, and retrospection was highlighted by DeRue et al. and many other leadership scholars during the past few years (Anseel, Lievens,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

& Schollaert, 2009; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). In addition, we developed a new self-assessment of learning agility—termed *viaEDGE*™—in 2011 that includes self-awareness (De Meuse et al., 2011).

Empirical Evidence Supporting the Importance of Learning Agility

To some extent, DeRue et al. questioned the empirical support for the predictive validity of learning agility. As practitioners, we do not have publication as our top priority. Thus, it is understandable that the authors found few empirical studies supporting the importance of the construct. We will take advantage of this opportunity to report some of our internal research. Before we present these findings, we first want to correct an error in the DeRue et al. article. In the Eichinger and Lombardo (2004) study, the ratings of learning agility and performance after promotion were provided by independent sources (different bosses). Hence, the correlation between the two variables was not a product of common source bias.

In a recent study, a global *Fortune* 100 pharmaceutical company administered the Choices Architect® assessment. The company implemented the assessment in two ways: as a single-rater method and as a multirater method. Employees participating in the single-rater method were rated only by their immediate bosses on learning agility. Employees participating in the multirater approach were rated by their immediate bosses *and* several of their peers. The assessment was conducted in 2010. In total, there were 6,730 employees in the single-rater group and 1,733 employees in the multirater group. Subsequently, learning agility ratings were correlated with boss ratings of performance as well as potential collected at a different time. For the single-rater group, the correlations were 0.33 ($p < .01$) for performance ratings and 0.42 ($p < .01$) for potential ratings. For the multirater group, the correlations were 0.34 ($p < .01$) for performance ratings and 0.40 ($p < .01$) for potential ratings. Although common method (boss rating) variance might have played a role in this study, we are confident about the relationship between learning agility and these criteria measures because of the very large sample sizes. The company also investigated the validity of learning agility in predicting the same criteria during the following year (2011). A random sample of participants was selected from each of the two groups. For the single-rater group ($N = 110$), learning agility assessed in 2010 was significantly correlated with performance ratings ($r = 0.40$, $p < .01$) and potential ratings ($r = 0.50$, $p < .01$) in the following year. For the multirater group ($N = 76$), learning agility assessed in 2010 likewise was significantly correlated with performance ratings ($r = 0.49$, $p < .01$) and potential ratings ($r = 0.45$, $p < .01$) in the subsequent year. These results suggest that the predictive validity of learning agility actually increases across time.

Based largely on Lombardo and Eichinger's (2000) model of learning agility, we developed the *viaEDGE*™ self-assessment instrument. This assessment was administered to 101 managers and executives in a global *Fortune* 500 consumer products company. It was found that self-ratings of learning agility were significantly correlated with boss ratings of leadership competency ($r = 0.29$, $p < .01$), proximity to the CEO position ($r = 0.25$, $p < .05$), and compensation ($r = 0.38$, $p < .01$). The assessment also was administered to 83 sales managers in a different global *Fortune* 500 pharmaceutical company. Employing a longitudinal research design, the study found that self-ratings of learning agility were significantly correlated to promotion rates ($r = 0.36$, $p < .01$) and annual salary increases ($r = 0.32$, $p < .01$) the participating managers had received during a period of 10 years. In addition, we found that learning agility provided incremental validity above emotional intelligence in predicting promotion rates ($\Delta R^2 = 0.09$, $p < .05$) and annual salary increases ($\Delta R^2 = 0.09$, $p < .05$). Taken together, these findings suggest that learning agility is positively related to leadership skill development and

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

(ultimately) predicts executive career success. Higher learning-agile individuals not only achieved greater career success but likewise advanced in their careers faster than their relatively lower learning-agile counterparts.

Conclusion

DeRue et al. call for conceptual clarity and more theoretical grounding. We endorse this call and have been alert to possible connections to other lines of research and theory to support learning agility since we created the Choices Architect® assessment in the mid-1990s. For example, we envision ties between the construct and the Big Five personality literature, especially ''Openness to Experience.'' Learning agility also might relate to ''Conscientiousness'' but likely in an inverse relationship. In terms of Sternberg's (1997) research on IQ, learning agility appears more similar to street smarts, interpersonal savvy, and possessing common sense than pure intellect.

An area where we disagree with DeRue et al. pertains to the unequivocal desirability of learning agility. Researchers have documented the nature of ''overuse'' with regard to leadership competencies (cf. Kaiser & Overfield, 2011). For example, confidence is an asset; arrogance is a liability. Given that we view learning agility as a metacompetency of leadership (De Meuse et al., 2010), it seems likely that possessing too much (or too little) can be a problem. Future researchers should explore the implications of when learning agility can become overused.

Another area to question whether learning agility is always desirable relates to the type of job one occupies. Obviously, executive positions require learning agility. However, jobs that require the accumulation of increasingly deeper levels of expertise in a specific functional or technical area have different characteristics than those of an executive. Therefore, those types of expertise-driven jobs may not benefit from learning agility. Indeed, we found in one recent study that learning agility was inversely related to ratings of clinical performance for physicians (De Meuse, Dai, & Lambrou, 2012). Future researchers should become much more sensitive and distinguish between positions that require learning agility for high potential leadership positions and those so called high professional or expertise-driven roles.

Many years ago, Kurt Lewin noted that ''there is nothing so practical as a good theory.'' The construct of learning agility originated in the practitioner world in an attempt to predict when top executives would flourish or derail (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Although it has emerged to become one of the most important concepts to the *practice* of talent management during the past 5 years, it has remained largely dormant in the *scientific* literature. Scholarly inquires such as DeRue et al.'s can provide an impetus for enhancing our theoretical understanding of learning agility. Hopefully, this discourse encourages future researchers to examine this critical variable. If that outcome materializes, it will enhance the identification, development, and measurement of high potential talent in our organizations.

References

Anseel, F., Lievens, F., & Schollaert, E. (2009, August). *Reflection as a strategy to enhance performance after feedback*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Chicago, IL.

Bennis, W. G., & Thomas, R. J. (2002). Crucibles of leadership. *Harvard Business Review, 80*, 39–42.

Boud, D., & Solomon, N. (2003). ''I don't think I am a learner'': Acts of naming learners at work. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 15*, 326–331.

Connolly, J. A., & Viswesvaran, C. (2002, April). *Assessing the construct validity of a measure of learning agility*. Paper presented at the 17th Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Toronto, Canada.

Cope, J. (2005). Toward a dynamic learning perspective of entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 29*, 373–397.

Daudelin, M. W. (1996). Learning from experience through reflection. *Organizational Dynamics, 24*, 36–48.

Day, D. V. (2000). Leadership development: A review in context. *The Leadership Quarterly, 11*, 581–613.

Day, D. V., & Harrison, M. M. (2007). A multilevel, identity-based approach to leadership development. *Human Resource Management Review, 17*, 360–373.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

De Meuse, K. P. (2011, October 12). *Learning agility: A vital component of high potential identification and development*. Webcast presentation for Human Capital Institute. Retrieved February 15, 2012, from http://www.hci.org/node/1197346.

De Meuse, K. P., & Dai, G. (2011, April). Learning agility: A critical attribute for developing the next generation of leaders. In R. A. Ross (Chair), *Utility of noncognitive assessments for developing MBA students*. Symposium presented at the 26th Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Chicago, IL.

De Meuse, K. P., Dai, G., Eichinger, R. W., Page, R. C., Clark, L. P., & Zewdie, S. (2011). *The development and validation of a self-assessment of learning agility* (Technical Report). Minneapolis, MN: Korn/Ferry International.

De Meuse, K. P., Dai, G., & Hallenbeck, G. S. (2010). Learning agility: A construct whose time has come. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 62*, 119–130.

De Meuse, K. P., Dai, G., & Lambrou, N. (2012). *The relationship between learning agility and performance outcomes for physicians* (Technical report). Minneapolis, MN: Korn/Ferry International.

Derry, S. J., & Murphy, D. A. (1986). Designing systems that train leaning ability: From theory to practice. *Review of Educational Research, 56*, 1–39.

DeRue, D. S., Ashford, S. J., & Myers, C. G. (2012). Learning agility: In search of conceptual clarity and theoretical grounding. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspective on Science and Practice, 5*, 258–279.

Dominick, P. G., Squires, P., & Cervone, D. (2010). Back to persons: On social-cognitive processes and products of leadership development experiences. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 3*, 33–37.

Eichinger, R. W., & Lombardo, M. M. (2004). Learning agility as a prime indicator of potential. *Human Resource Planning, 27*, 12–16.

Eichinger, R. W., Lombardo, M. M., & Capretta, C. C. (2010). *FYI for learning agility*. Minneapolis, MN: Korn/Ferry International.

Fiol, C. M., & Lyles, M. A. (1985). Organizational learning. *Academy of Management Review, 10*, 803–813.

Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of psychological inquiry. *American Psychologist, 34*, 906–911.

Freedman, A. M. (1998). Pathways and crossroads to institutional leadership. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 50*, 131–151.

Gosling, J., & Mintzberg, H. (2003). The five minds of a manager. *Harvard Business Review, 81*, 54–63.

Hezlett, S. (2010). Suggestions for new research on experience-based learning. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 3*, 56–60.

Honey, P., & Mumford, A. (1992). *The manual of learning style* (3rd ed.). Maidenhead, UK: Peter Honey.

Hooijberg, R., Hunt, J. G., & Dodge, G. E. (1997). Leadership complexity and development of the leaderplex model. *Journal of Management, 23*, 375–408.

Kaiser, R. B., & Overfield, D. V. (2011). Strengths, strengths overused, and lopsided leadership. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 63*, 89–109.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (1989). *Eighty-eight assignments for development in place*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (2000). High potentials as high learners. *Human Resource Management, 39*, 321–330.

Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (2001). *The leadership machine*. Minneapolis, MN: Lominger.

McCall, M. W., Jr., Lombardo, M. M., & Morrison, A. M. (1988). *The lessons of experience: How successful executives develop on the job*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

McCauley, C. D., Ruderman, M. N., Ohlott, P. J., & Morrow, J. E. (1994). Assessing the developmental components of managerial jobs. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79*, 544–560.

Mumford, A. (1996). Four approaches to learning from experience. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 8*, 22–29.

Mumford, A., & Honey, P. (1992). Questions and answers on learning styles questionnaire. *Industrial and Commercial Training, 24*, 10–13.

Norton, L. W. (2010). Flexible leadership: An integrative perspective. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 62*, 143–150.

Saban, J. M., Killion, J. P., & Green, C. G. (1994). The centric reflection model: A kaleidoscope for staff developers. *Journal of Staff Development, 18*, 16–20.

Snell, R. (1992). Experiential learning at work: Why can't it be painless? *Personnel Review, 21*, 12–26.

Sternberg, R. J. (1997). *Successful intelligence: How practical and creative intelligence determine success in life*. New York, NY: Plume.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01445.x Published online by Cambridge University Press