

Learning Agility: The Leadership Superpower in the Age of AI

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"In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future."
— Eric Hoffer

As a business leader navigating the pressures of digital transformation, global complexity, and AI-driven disruption, one question should be at the top of your mind:

Are you learning fast enough to lead the future?

In today's environment, traditional leadership traits—intelligence, charisma, past performance—are no longer enough. According to Korn Ferry, one trait consistently predicts success in leadership roles better than IQ or even EQ: **learning agility**.



What Is Learning Agility?

Korn Ferry defines learning agility as:

"The willingness and ability to learn from experience, and then apply those lessons to succeed in new and often first-time situations."

Learning agile individuals aren't just fast learners—they are **flexible, resourceful, adaptable, and thoughtful**. They excel at absorbing information from experiences and extrapolating to navigate unfamiliar terrain.

In fact, Korn Ferry's research shows that **learning agility is the single most reliable predictor of future leadership potential**, even more than experience or technical knowledge.

Reflection: When was the last time you were in a situation where your experience didn't provide the answer? How did you respond?

The Five Components of Learning Agility

Korn Ferry breaks learning agility into **five key components**, all essential to leading in volatile, complex environments:

1. Mental Agility

The ability to examine problems in unique ways, deal comfortably with complexity, and make creative connections between ideas.

Example: A tech CEO navigating new data privacy regulations by applying lessons from supply chain transparency frameworks.

2. People Agility

The capacity to build diverse networks and relate well to others, especially in tense or high-stakes situations. Emotionally intelligent leaders excel here.

Example: A team leader who bridges cultural differences during a global merger.

3. Change Agility

A willingness to experiment, embrace change, and thrive in ambiguity. Curious, open-minded leaders are energized—not paralyzed—by the unknown.

Example: A retail exec pivoting quickly from brick-and-mortar to e-commerce during the pandemic.

4. Results Agility

The ability to deliver results even in first-time or high-pressure conditions. It's about resilience, resourcefulness, and inspiring others through uncertainty.

Example: A startup founder hitting funding goals despite economic downturns.

5. Self-Awareness

An honest understanding of your strengths, limitations, and the impact you have on others. Self-aware leaders actively seek feedback and reflect to grow.

Reflection Prompt: How often do you ask for candid feedback—and what do you do with it?

These five dimensions form the foundation of Korn Ferry's **Leadership Potential Assessment (KFALP)**, used by organizations worldwide to identify and develop high-potential talent.

Why Learning Agility Matters More Than Ever

In the age of AI, change is exponential. Business models, customer expectations, and team structures are all in flux. Algorithms may outperform humans in processing data—but only **humans can lead through complexity** and ambiguity.

Learning agility equips leaders to:

- Adapt quickly to disruptive technologies like AI and automation
- Innovate by synthesizing information from diverse experiences
- Make confident decisions when precedent offers no playbook
- Create inclusive, forward-thinking cultures that attract top talent

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

— Alvin Toffler



Building Learning Agility as a Leader

The good news? Learning agility isn't fixed—it can be **developed intentionally**. Here's how:

- **Encourage Experimentation**

Create psychological safety so teams (and leaders) can try new approaches without fear of failure.

- **Rotate Across Functions or Cultures**

Expose yourself and your teams to new contexts. Diversity of experience fuels agility.

- **Embed Reflection**

After every major initiative, ask: *What surprised us? What would we do differently next time?*

- **Model Curiosity**

Leaders set the tone. Ask more questions than you answer. Use tools like AI not just to automate, but to explore.

- **Solicit—and Act on—Feedback**

Demonstrate humility and self-awareness. Show your team you're always learning, too.

Learning Agility in Action

Satya Nadella's transformation of Microsoft is one of the clearest examples of leadership rooted in learning agility. Upon becoming CEO, Nadella shifted the culture from a "know-it-all" to a "learn-it-all" mindset, embraced open-source collaboration, and successfully pivoted to cloud-first innovation—restoring Microsoft as a market leader.

Or take **Airbnb's Brian Chesky**, who leaned into self-awareness and people agility when reshaping Airbnb during the 2020 pandemic. Rather than retreat, he restructured with transparency, solicited feedback from thousands of hosts, and reinvented the business model for long-term resilience.

The Future Belongs to the Agile

Whether you're leading a Fortune 500 company, a regional team, or a disruptive startup, learning agility is your compass in unfamiliar terrain. It's not about knowing all the answers—it's about having the confidence and capability to navigate questions no one's asked yet.

So, ask yourself:

Are you developing your own learning agility—and enabling it in those around you?

In the age of AI, where technical skills are transient but adaptability is enduring, learning agility isn't just a leadership advantage. It's the foundation of future-ready leadership.

About the Author

Nina is a strategic HR and organizational development leader who helps businesses scale and transform through their people. With a track record spanning Fortune 100s to high-growth SaaS tech firms, she has led global initiatives in leadership development, culture building, and org design that drive measurable business results. Backed by advanced credentials and a data-driven approach, Nina partners with executive teams to successfully implement strategies and accelerate change in complex, fast-moving environments.

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