



## AGILE LEARNERS & STRATEGIC RESPONSIBILITY

**Dr. Isa Mishra, Dr. Shradha Padhi, Dr. Sucheta Priyabadini, Dr. Mamta Thakur**

*Associate Professor, HR, School of Management, KIIT University, Bhubaneswar*

*Chief People Officer; Purple Finance, Mumbai*

*Maa Rama Devi Chair Professor, Rama Devi Women's University, Bhubaneswar*

*School of Logistics and Supply Chain Management, Symbiosis University of Applied Sciences Indore MP  
INDIA*

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### INTRODUCTION:

Workplace today and the surrounding environment has become a significant part of the VUCA World - characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity & ambiguity. It is only the learning agility and the ability to withstand change which can take us seamlessly through our work journey. This capability is directly proportional to the satisfaction and pleasure which work life can render. The ultimate successful survivors are those who are the most adaptable, who learn from experiences in and around them and co-exist & co-evolve with the complex adaptive systems within which they work and live.

This leads on to the accepted fact that it is an agile learner who makes it to the top and leaves a mark. It is also an agile learner who is a "Leader" in the true sense of the word.

To set a background, it is necessary to traverse the Learning journey. This journey started with Traditional Learning, which has been continuing since aeons and is still preferred in most conventional education set ups.

**Traditional Learning** is characterized by:

- Teacher-centric classrooms with instruction based on textbooks, lectures & individual written assignments
- Regimented classrooms
- Teachers in the mode of knowledge administrators rather than facilitators
- Chalk and talk methods
- Extensive use of pedagogy
- Unified curriculum irrespective of changing times and regardless of ability or interest
- Focus on examinations and scores on tests
- Focus on rote learning & memorization and thus, non-focus on the actual understanding of learners
- Corporal & physical punishment to maintain classroom discipline and punish errors

Thus, professionals who are offshoots of such learning have been perceived to be extra disciplined, more for the sake of corporate and social uniformity while trying to align themselves with the existing corporate setups. They normally do not like to venture beyond what is expected of them.

Gradually, the traditional academic & education structure was challenged and then started the advent of alternative & modern education in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Many social reformers and individualists started exploring this approach. The wave of alternative education had taken over all across the world and new methods of teaching were welcomed and adopted all across. An increase in alternative educational ideas and practices can be recognized in India from the 1970s onwards. The

education system saw a revolution with the emergence of educational institutions with new concepts of teaching which pervaded professional institutions as well. This created yet another era of professionals with new values and concepts stemming from education as elucidated below.

The new concepts inherent with **Alternative & Modern Education** include:

- Student centric education and individual centric programs at work life
- Emphasis on learning with retention & accumulation of valuable knowledge & skills
- Open classrooms
- Progressive education involving hands on activities, student / employee led findings and group activities
- Theme based projects like citing stories and cases about manufacturing an item while calculating the economics of the project; like reading a story about cooking & calculating the cost of the food item.
- Technology-driven classrooms
- Continuous comprehensive evaluation
- Cross-curricular connections
- Inquiry-based learning
- Emphasis on understanding of concepts
- Linking curriculum with life
- Emphasis on skill building, life skills and values
- Smart interactive boards
- Collaborative learning with groups working together
- Differential / Differentiated learning emphasizing on One-on-one coaching with a student / professional, designed around his/her specific challenges
- Activity-based learning and learning labs
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Integrative and social responsibility and civic engagement
- Digitization in teaching, learning assessment and feedback
- Collaborative learning
- Flipped classrooms focusing on in class exercises and activities
- Problem-based learning with emphasis on case studies
- Classrooms based on multiple cultural settings

Thus, in the mid-twenties, emerged a new class of professionals and a new class of employers who started looking for adaptable and agile learners. Learning based education created professionals who were high on their analytical skills and logical reasoning capabilities. These are the kind of professionals who delve into situations, taking maximum ownership and responsibility. Their analytical skills normally make them suitable to strategic roles. That agile learning and strategic thinking go hand in hand is an established and unquestioned knowledge. Those with high Learning Agility are those who perform well in first time, challenging situations—often, in a variety of very different jobs.

Today, both prospective employees & existing employees are being tested and selected on criteria like –

- CQ - Initiative & curiosity quotient which has become more important than IQ
- EI – Emotional Intelligence in situations
- Street smartness & quick wit
- Perceptiveness

- Ability to present multiple perspectives in any situation
- Ability to co-relate learning from experience

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

### Leadership

James MacGregor Burns, in his book titled “Leadership”, elucidated the qualities of a leader and it has been comprehended since then that the effectiveness of a leader is gauged through his qualities and character. Intellectual writers like Jack Welch, Jim Collins, Darwin Smith, Mintzberg, Robbins, Judge & Vohra and many more have propounded different leadership styles. There are numerous opinions regarding effective leadership styles, yet there is no style which can be branded as the most effective. Research in this field majorly indicate that the effectiveness of leadership depends on external factors like the situation on hand. James MacGregor spoke about a type of leader called strategic leader who aligns his actions with the organizational strategy. This leader works with the vision, culture and values of the organization he is associated with. Strategic leadership is a process where the leaders continuously monitor whether activities are aligned to meet the organizational goals. Leadership traits which have been extensively talked about include the traits of smartness, verbal ability, aggressiveness, consistency and hard work. However, agility is not a trait which finds special mention in any content on leadership.

With this preamble, the results of **an internal assessment study along with Talking Talent process** are being presented as under.

This assessment was conducted in Jan, 2021 in a manufacturing company, dealing with products of steel, based in Kolkata. The company has 630 employees in the officer category with 53 employees in the top management, 217 employees in the middle management and 360 employees in the lower management.

Like most manufacturing companies, Sales & Operation Planning Department is normally the department which is given utmost importance for obvious reasons as efficacy of this department controls flow of revenue. Large scale attrition by way of separation and retirement made it imperative to think of filling up certain roles identified as critical. The management here had to fill in these critical roles in the top management in the S&OP department, for which it was necessary to make an assessment of the existing employees who were declared as the best performers in the previous two appraisal years. However, the management was unsure of the kind of verticals / assignments to be entrusted, in absence of a special agility study. An internal study was conducted on 35 respondents from multiple verticals of different departments, who belonged to the middle management and were considered potential employees for taking on higher assignments.

The in-house assessment was carried out to gauge Agility in fast track performers with the following objectives in mind.

### **Purpose of the internal assessment & Talking Talent session:**

- An independent, quantifiable assessment of learning agility which can be used to validate the selection of the high potentials already identified. Many highly skilled companies with highly honed talent management systems obtain much value by systematically measuring learning agility.
- Improvement can be effected in the Talking Talent processes against the learning agility assessment.

- The exercise provided a comprehensive assessment of various factors and dimensions which serve to develop managers.
- These kind of assessments precludes companies from making some serious erroneous managerial decisions, pertaining to delegating certain assignments to the wrong individual.
- Many large MNCs have hundreds of employees who need to be evaluated from a talent management perspective. Many of those employees may have limited visibility with upper-management. Hence, such assessments can add much value by systematically measuring learning agility.
- This assessment ensures that favoritism is not shown to a selected few. The role assignment is backed up by real life situations.
- This kind of an assessment can eliminate the contention that high potential selection is made simply based on upper-management's "gut instincts."

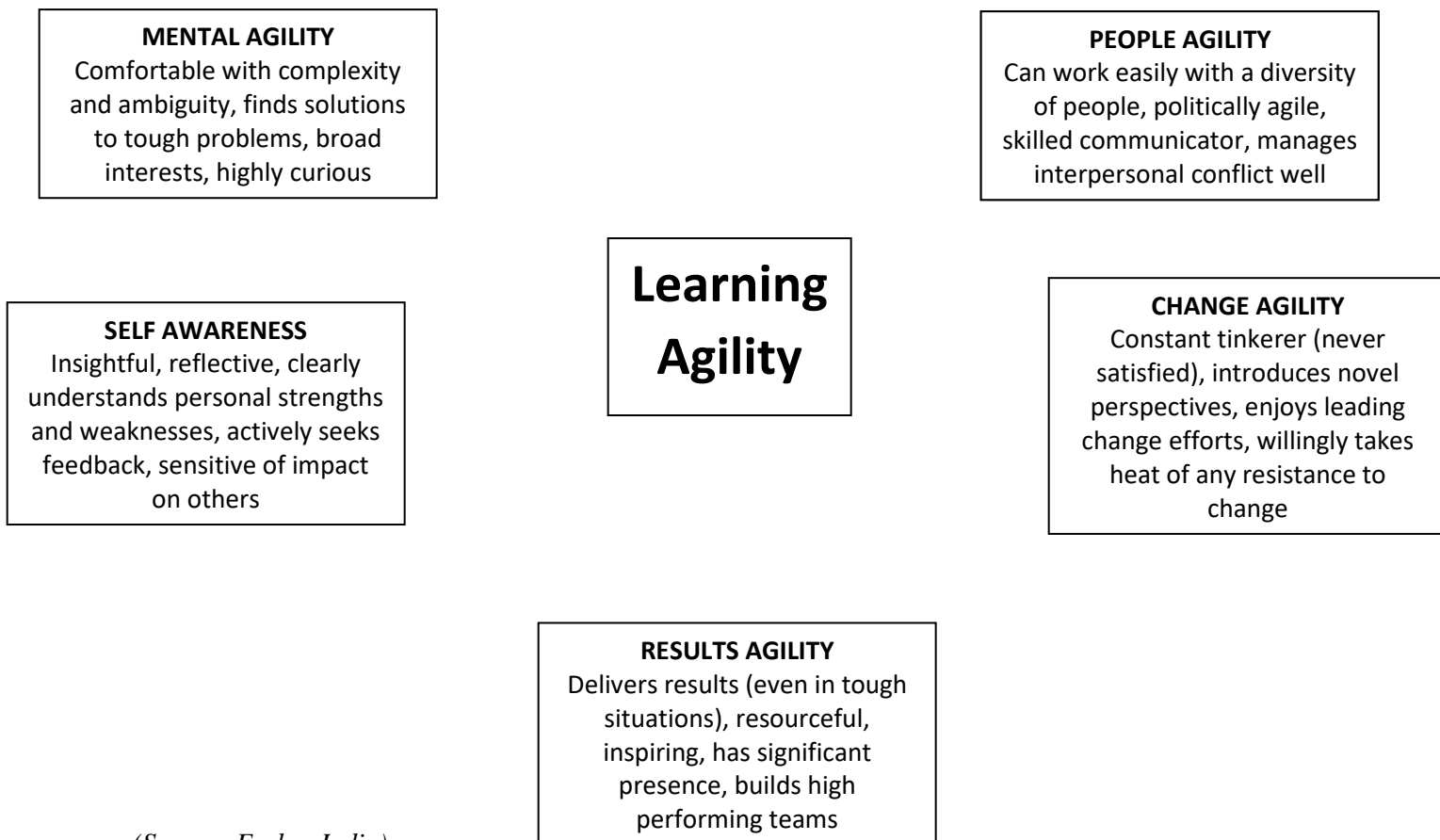
The 35 respondents were drawn from different verticals of Sales & Operation Planning Department as follows:

i.	Sales Department	11 nos.
ii.	Marketing Department	7 nos.
iii.	Products Department	3 nos.
iv.	International Business	2 nos.
v.	New Projects	8 nos.
vi.	Business Development	4 nos.

Required vacant roles department wise:

i.	Sales Department	7 nos.
ii.	Marketing Department	9 nos.
iii.	Products Department	5 nos.
iv.	International Business	3 nos.
v.	New Projects	7 nos.
vi.	Business Development	4 nos.

The purpose of the assessment was to find out where the 35 respondents were placed in the **Learning Agility Factors' Wheel**. **The Wheel** is presented below for clarity:

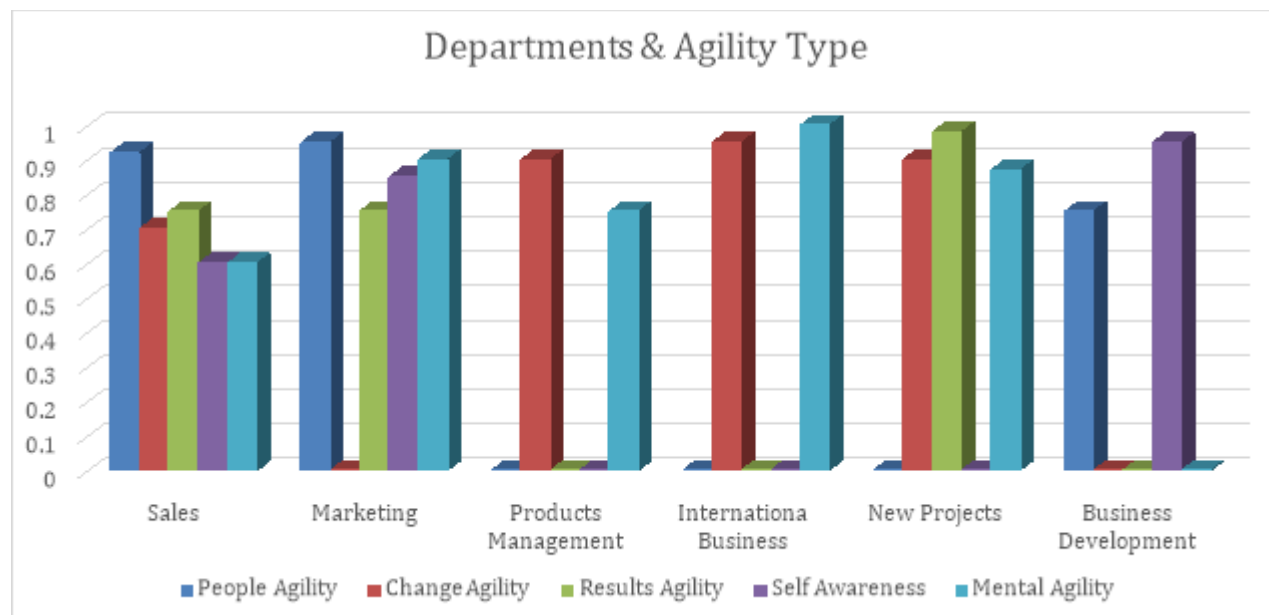
**Learning Agility Factors' Wheel**

(Source: Forbes India)

A 4 point questionnaire was administered on the 35 respondents. This exercise was followed by a “**Talking Talent**” Session - 30 minute discussion with each respondent, on the responses provided by them. The Reporting Authority, HR Head and cross functional Head were present during each discussion. As expected and planned, the responses & the relevant practical instances cited along with statements given by respondents during individual discussions, clearly indicated the kind of roles best suited for each respondent. This went on to serve as the major input while selecting verticals / assignments for placing them in higher roles.

A graphical representation of the responses given is presented below.

**Chart No. 1**



**A. Conclusions** drawn from the responses:

1. Assesseees pertaining to Sales were found high on all attributes of Agile learning & hence presented flexibility for placement in higher roles in departments of Sales and Marketing.
2. Assesseees pertaining to Marketing who were found high in all factors except Change Ability were shortlisted for placement in higher roles in departments of Sales and Marketing.
3. Assesseees pertaining to Products & International Business departments both were found very high on Change Ability, hence were shortlisted for higher roles in Projects, International Business & Business Development departments. These departments are the ones which witness rapid change in view of changing economy & thus dependence on external factors.
4. Assesseees pertaining to New Projects very aptly possessed high Results Agility and it was decided to retain them in the same department in higher roles.
5. Few assesseees pertaining to Marketing & Business Development who did not test positive on **Change Agility, were the ones who were slotted to be out of the race.** Change Agility is one of the most important traits and thus assesseees testing very low on this factor were not shortlisted.
6. **A very interesting observation** emerged from the study. Most assesseees were perceived to possess learning factors as is normally expected from employees pertaining to a specific department. This indicates that job role, competency mapping for the role and job specification have remained consistent over the years from the time of recruitment, for most respondents except the very few who were found resistant to change.

The above conclusions were recorded against each assessee and the next round – Talent Talk session with each assessee was conducted within 7 days to maintain a continuity in assessment.

**B. Conclusions** drawn from the Talent Talk sessions: Some responses and their interpretations drawn from the individual discussions are presented below.

✓ Responses of those found **high on “People Agility”**

- “...This is what I understand from your position in this situation ...”
- “...What are your ideas on this...?”
- “...Let’s just agree to agree...”
- “...Speaking of that, what do you think of this idea to help out your situation...?”

✓ Responses of those found **high on “Change Agility”**

- “...I spent all day and all night thinking of better ways to finish this project”
- “...Why can’t it be done...?”
- “.....OK, so this didn’t work. What did we learn that we can apply...?”

✓ Responses of those found **high on “Results Agility”**

- “...I know it looks bad, but let’s not give up yet...”
- “...I enjoy working on a lot of things at once...”
- “...I’m not going to take it personally...”

✓ Responses of those found **high on “Self Awareness”**

- “....”I’ve been reflecting on how I might have handled that situation differently ...”
- “...I’d love to get your perspective on how I fared in this meeting...”
- “...This continues to be a problem area for me. If I’m going to reach my goal, I need to keep working on...”

✓ Responses of those found **high on “Mental Agility”**

- “...Let’s look beyond the obvious...”
- “...Another way to look at this is...”
- “...I was curious to see if there were similarities or contrasts between this problem and...”

The most critical positions were allotted to respondents having a blend of more than 3 agile attributes.

- A. Respondents **high on People Agility & Self Awareness** were allotted Roles involving interaction with internal & external customers.
- B. Respondents **high on Change Agility, Results Agility&Mental Agility** were allotted Roles involving independent charge of Projects in new business units; for Product Management; Projects involving International Business; Strategic Business Development.

To sum up, the importance attributed to Agile Learning is increasing by the day. Today's most successful businesses are improving their overall performance by applying Agile Strategy practices - a dynamic approach to navigate in complex and ambiguous business settings. Innovative leaders are now applying agile concepts to Strategy Formulation and Strategic Execution. Agile Learning improves the ability to

respond to external changes, while relentlessly pursuing their most advantageous, value-adding strategies. Agile Learning aids and helps in Agile Execution which leads to an improved approach to analyzing industries, generating innovative alternatives, making improved choices and ultimately delivering more unique and sustainable value to customers.

Arriving where we started from, every organization today thrives to be or is already a learning organization”; one that uses an “inspect and adapt” feedback cycle to continuously create and refine its corporate strategy. An organization may start in the same manner as a traditional organization. The vision & business outcomes gradually change with changing economic conditions. **It is from this point that organizations differ** – depending on the kind of agile resources the organization has, who come together to agree on, and align to, the vision and outcomes. Rather than spend months creating and agreeing to a plan - the executives agree on “how” to plan expeditiously. They use the following approach:

1. Create & refine the specific initiatives that will work towards the vision, a vision which is dynamic;
2. Pioneer continuous improvement into the processes;
3. Inspect and measure the impact the current changes may have on the vision;
4. Simultaneously, ensure visible economic spending at every step.



Assessment Questionnaire

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