COMMENTARIES

Learning Agility: Spanning the Rigor–Relevance Divide

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Having struggled for several years with not only trying to define learning agility but attempting to measure this construct as well (Mitchinson, Gerard, Roloff, & Burke, 2012; Mitchinson & Morris, 2012)—a far more daunting task—it is our desire to state at the outset that we are grateful to DeRue, Ashford, and Myers (2012) for (a) their work on ''conceptual clarity'' and (b) helping us feel that we are no longer alone in our pursuit of definition and relevant theory. With these points in mind, we have three comments to contribute to the focal article. First, although the article provides academic rigor to the construct of learning agility that, to date, has been lacking, it potentially comes at a cost to the practical use of the construct's origins. Second, although the authors place much needed effort on clarifying exactly what is meant by the term ''agility,'' we argue that the term ''learning'' requires equal—perhaps greater—scrutiny. Finally, we close with an exploration of some of the benefits and challenges of constructing a measure of learning agility based on this new model.

Practical Origins: Identifying High Potential

It is important to recall that the construct of learning agility arose from a clearly

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defined issue facing contemporary organizations, namely how to identify high-potential employees, especially those that might have leadership potential (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Although learning agility seemed to constitute the ''right stuff'' of high-potential employees, no specific construct or measure existed at the time. Learning ability had been well documented (e.g., Cronbach & Snow, 1969; Kolb, 1984; Woodrow, 1946) and assessments of high potential often incorporated some forms of learning (e.g., Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997), but nothing had yet specifically targeted the construct directly. The strategy for addressing this organizational need was practice driven: Conduct executive interviews and gather expert opinions to define and measure the concept of learning agility (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). In large part, this strategy worked. The Choices Architect® and more recently the *ViaEdge* measures (De Meuse et al., 2011), although overly broad, have been well received in organizations and seem to add some value to selection and development processes (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004).

DeRue et al. have approached learning agility from a different angle. Their strategy has been to define a construct that is distinguishable from other related constructs and situated within a broader nomological network. This approach has also given us much. The construct of learning agility posited by DeRue et al. provides a parsimonious definition to a previously unclear term allowing for empirical

study. However, what is gained in clarity and rigor may come at the cost of practicality. From a conceptual perspective, learning agility becomes clearer when it is decoupled from motivation, performance, and the particular contexts in which it is presumed valuable. However, from an applied perspective, it is almost impossible to separate individuals from their internal states and their environments. Therefore, we question how this model might be used as originally intended: to identify and develop high-potential employees.

Clarifying Learning: Process or Outcome?

Although the authors do an impressive job of clarifying the ''agility'' component of learning agility, it is less clear what constitutes the ''learning'' component. DeRue et al. do not spend a great deal of time discussing what constitutes ''learning in and across situations'' and how it is conceptually distinct from ''learning agility'' or ''performance.'' In fact, in the literature on team learning, learning is often conceptualized as both a process and an outcome (e.g., Argote, Gruenfeld, & Naquin, 2001). Here, in particular, the lines between what constitutes the process of learning, the learning itself, and the outcome of learning (i.e., performance) seem somewhat blurred. First, the line between ''learning in and across situations'' and performance is not clear. Indeed, a highly practical way to measure whether learning has occurred is by testing for an improvement in performance. Furthermore, the distinction between ''behavioral processes'' and ''learning in and across situations'' is not clear. Both the process of learning and the learning itself may, in fact, be the same behaviors. For example, seeking feedback is an important process that may lead to learning, and also, a learning-agile individual may learn that it is important to seek feedback. To us, it seems as though the ''learning'' is an intangible concept that will be hard to separate from either learning behaviors or performance.

In addition, we would like to suggest one potential avenue for expanding the ''learning'' component of learning agility. In their seminal work on organization learning, Argyris and Schön (1978) outline both the single- and double-loop learning processes. Whereas single-loop learning is primarily focused on problem solving, double-loop learning involves examining oneself and one's own assumptions about a situation. We would suggest that individuals high in learning agility engage the double-loop learning process, and indeed, many of the cognitive and behavioral processes in DeRue et al.'s model, such as reflecting on one's behavior and counterfactual thinking, are double-loop type activities. However, based on our work on learning agility, we believe that there are additional cognitive and behavioral processes that may be worthwhile contributions to the model. Specifically, the same field of work by Argyris and Schön includes defensive reasoning and defensive behaviors as significant barriers to effective learning. We believe the absence of such defensive patterns to be an important component of learning agility, and as such we suggest that behaviors such as avoiding failure, saving face, and blaming should be included in the model. There may also be types of defensive reasoning that manifest as negative cognitive processes, such as suppressing negative feelings or forming external attributions for situations. It must be noted that DeRue et al. maintain a focus on cognitions and behaviors that enhance learning agility and thus may have decided to bound their model by only including positive components; however, we suggest that it would be useful to also consider potential learning agility ''derailers'' in future work.

Measuring Learning Agility

The comments above lead us to a discussion of the construction and use of a learning agility measure. From a practical standpoint, it is important that we continue to measure learning agility in a way that is accessible and adds value to

selection and development efforts within organizations. This belief has led us to focus more on behavior than cognition and thus operationalize learning agility primarily in terms of observable behaviors. There are a number of practical reasons why this measurement approach is valuable. First and foremost, it is in line with common organizational practices. Many organizations have become comfortable with the use of behavioral measures, particularly as practices such as multirater assessments and behavioral interviews have become more prevalent. Second, because behaviors are readily observable, behavioral statements can be rated by the individual target and others around them. This has potential benefits for both the individual and the organization. For the individual learner, behavioral feedback can help individuals understand the specific actions to take in becoming more learning agile. Receiving such detailed feedback has been shown to lead to performance improvement over time (Atwater, Brett, & Charles, 2007; Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005). For the organization, this approach allows selection decisions to be made based on actual learning behaviors (e.g., feedback seeking behaviors) as opposed to being made based on inferences about the behaviors.

Measuring the cognitive processes proposed by DeRue et al. is important for the research community to test their conceptual model of learning agility. However, we question whether we will be able to do this in a way that remains practically viable and true to the original intentions of the construct. For instance, research on counterfactual thinking traditionally requires experts to code passages of text to assess the extent to which individuals consider how altering their past behavior may have resulted in different outcomes (e.g., Branscombe, Wohl, Owen, Allison, & N'gbala, 2003; McCrea, 2007). Even self-ratings of such processes can be difficult as individuals may be unable to accurately assess their own competence in this realm (Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005). Such measurement approaches make sense

in academic research settings but may be less viable in the workplace. As such, a trade off in how we measure learning agility may emerge. We will need to find ways to balance practical realities with theoretical demands for the concept of learning agility to truly span the rigor-relevance divide.

Conclusion

We believe that DeRue et al. have made great strides in bringing a practically oriented construct into the academic community. We hope that this work continues to stimulate debate that leads to a more comprehensive and integrative perspective on this important construct. This will require an ''open-source'' approach to scholarship that is grounded in transparency and collaboration. Ultimately, we would like to see scholars and practitioners continue to work together and share ideas about how to best develop empirically sound and practically useful research on the construct of learning agility.

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