

# Leader Agility

*It's what sustains success.*



by Kevin Cashman

ONE OF THE MOST clever and catchy pieces of career advice I've heard was uttered by advertising genius Bruce Barton, who invented Betty Crocker and gave General Motors and General Electric their names. He told leaders: "When you're through changing, you're though."

Indeed, the reality of leadership and career development is "change or die."

The entire c-suite community owes Ann Howard and her late husband Doug Bray thanks for the groundbreaking studies they conducted on AT&T's behalf. Their research found that pre-selected "high potentials" were often outpaced by lower potential employees if the latter had the benefit of more development-oriented roles or managers teaching them to adroitly overcome career obstacles.

Recently, research by Ken Brousseau and Rikard Larsson of Decision Dynamics and Gary Hourihan of Korn/Ferry International found that successful executives evolve their decision-making styles through their careers in a predictable pattern—from decisive to flexible to hierarchic to integrative. When workers try to leap to the head of the class without these intermediary steps or resist new learning in favor of stubborn old habits, they stall their careers. Many skills demanded of top leaders are the opposite of those valued early in their careers.

Today, agility is key to succeeding as a leader. Business is more like a circus than a quiz bowl. Raw IQ contributes little if you can't embrace and operate in the gray zone that comes from other people's ideas. We need *learning agility*, the set of interrelated talents that help people dexterously toggle mental, interpersonal, and results-focused approaches toward accomplishment and advancement. Leadership agility is one of the most powerful assets any leader can possess—and one of the hardest to master.

Executives repeatedly place change at the top of their list of challenges. Problems at the top are more multifaceted and ambiguous. The solutions

aren't always familiar or formulaic. Moving from senior manager to VP requires you to keep growing, learning, and adapting to demands.

It's like rock-climbing. To get to the top, you need to look up regularly. Your mind, body and emotions must be attuned to the next challenge of the terrain—then the next. The approach must alter according to the needs of each danger and each opportunity ahead. As you progress, the terrain is less worn and weathered. It feels different from when you started and requires you to flex and stretch different muscles in new ways.

To cultivate a productive leadership culture, recognize the importance of learning agility. Michael Lombardo and his team at Lominger International proved that agile learning is an important factor in identifying and selecting any candidate, regardless of gender, seniority or position. You need to consider two types of talent when hiring: those apparent, unchanging qualities that serve junior managers immediately and over time, and those that don't emerge until a candidate has been dealt a few wildcards. Examples of stretch assignments meant to bring about growth through change include having the employee start projects from square one, fix something in need of repair, take assignments out of one's home country, switch from line to staff or vice versa, take big leaps in terms of scope or scale and get exposure to handling varying projects.

**Agility: Both Skill and Strategy**  
Leaders who recognize the importance of this issue know that agility underlies more than just the development and success of their talent—it can be a powerful basis for strategy and competitive advantage.

Toyota's enviable product development is a testament to the transformational power of orchestrating agile systems of people and processes.

Departments in the Japanese automaker take individual responsibility for managing and improving functional areas like the power train, electronics or chassis. However, by no means are they left in their silos. Instead, they benefit

from a customized, concurrent development timeline that incorporates simultaneous product and manufacturing design, early systems integration and continual coordination and testing. Beyond ensuring the elements of the vehicle are top quality and fit together, Toyota's intensive approach enables it to run parallel-path development, more strategically weigh design and engineering trade-offs, and capitalize on new opportunities with flexibility.

As opposed to a process reactively based on compliance, Toyota's quality-centered approach increases durability and reliability, saving product and warranty costs that can instead be put towards innovation. In contrast to many carmakers sweating out the pressure to make more efficient, environmentally friendly vehicles, Toyota had the agile resources and mindset in the 1990s to make a long-range investment in hybrid technology. Their forward thinking experimentation brought about the Prius, winner of the Intelli-Choice award.

This structure and development process are just two areas of a strategy of agility. Anchoring them are crucial career and leadership development systems arming engineers with wide-ranging experiences and preparing them to navigate change effectively. These learning and people systems provide the greatest potential to leverage change.

Agility needs to be experienced from one level to another, and leaders-in-development need to exercise agility in multiple contexts, gaining exposure to different experiences and patterns of work that can help them effectively find their way in future situations. Some individuals need practice on mental agility, expanding their capacity for strategic and creative thinking. Others need to be placed into results-driven environments, where their success is dependent on their ability to produce. People agility and change agility comprise the biggest developmental needs.

Many leaders have the integrative ability to weave together the disjointed, to craft novel solutions, and to make good decisions on the spot, even without complete data. Agility is a key to vibrant growth and to true leadership. **LE**

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**ACTION: Cultivate leadership agility.**

