What makes someone a High Potential?
Leaders of today and tomorrow need to be better than the leaders they replace because the challenges are greater, the speed faster, the competition tougher, and the marketplace increasingly global. In short, the leaders of today and tomorrow must be agile leaders, resourceful in the face of change, and above all, able to learn from experience. People with this ability perform well under first-time, challenging conditions. These people are learning agile.

FYI® for Learning Agility 2nd Edition is designed to help any motivated person develop skills that will lead to increased Learning Agility. The suggestions provided are aimed at gaining insight on learning strengths and remediating skill needs.

Powerful content includes:
- A Fundamentals of Learning Agility chapter that explores the research foundation behind the concept of Learning Agility and implications for applying Learning Agility in both the identification and development of tomorrow’s leaders.
- Over 250 easy-to-implement Tips to Increase Skills to develop Learning Agility.
- Listings in each chapter of Assignments to Practice Skill that research shows provide the richest learning experiences and opportunities to develop Learning Agility.
- A list of Resources to Learn More in each chapter—books, articles, blogs, video links—to help deepen understanding and include in Learning Agility development plans.
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Based on the groundbreaking research that has identified what behaviors lead to executive success, this book provides all the resources needed to understand Learning Agility and to devise a plan to increase Learning Agility.

For additional information and related publications, please contact korn/ferry leadership and talent consulting at business_office@kornferry.com or visit us at www.kornferry.com/products

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Introduction

A fundamental shift has taken place in the world of work. Permanent forces of change are taking hold in the form of globalization, technological shifts, and economic and political uncertainty. Everything’s faster, more interconnected, complex, and ambiguous than ever before. As a result, the era of job stability and predictability is now a thing of the past.

The only way to survive, let alone thrive, in the face of such overwhelming change is to adapt at the same pace of the change, if not even faster. This means being able to develop new skills in the blink of an eye, to face unfamiliar challenges without a “playbook” to guide you, to find an answer when the problem itself isn’t clear. In short, it means you have to become adept at knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do.

But how do you do that? The secret is something called Learning Agility. Individuals who excel at Learning Agility have mastered the ability to effectively learn from their experiences. They embrace what happens to them, both good and bad, and look for the key takeaways and lessons learned. And they don’t stop there. They seek ways to actively apply those lessons, especially to new and difficult challenges that they face.

Learning Agility is a well-defined set of behaviors that has been studied for several decades. While skill at Learning Agility does vary, it is an ability that can be developed, primarily through seeking and gaining from experiences that build breadth and adaptability. This book breaks down the specific elements of Learning Agility and provides a practical, actionable approach to developing what has now become one of the must-have skills for workplace success.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book was designed for any motivated person seeking to develop skills that lead to increased Learning Agility. The suggestions provided are aimed at gaining insight and strength in specific areas where Learning Agility needs to be developed. It does not matter what level of the organization you are a part of or what type of industry or function you are in. If you perceive that Learning Agility is important to your current and future success and you are committed to developing, this book is for you. In addition to individual learners, the content will also help anyone who is serving as a manager, mentor, or feedback giver.
Timing is important. Do make certain that you are ready to develop. The earliest and most critical stages in the development process are the awareness and acceptance of the need to develop. If you are in denial, rationalizing, confused, or being defensive about having needs, this book will not help.

Awareness and acceptance aren’t enough though. You also need to be motivated. Individuals who accept that they have a need to increase their Learning Agility but do not have the motivation, drive, urgency, or energy to do anything about it will also not be helped by what’s in this book.

So, this book is intended for people who believe they have a need and want to do something about it. If this describes you, there are hundreds of tips in this book that will help you develop skills that lead to increased Learning Agility.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK:
Each of the 27 chapters addresses one of the dimensions of Learning Agility and includes the following sections:

1. Map – At the beginning of each dimension chapter, the map explains key elements of the dimension and their importance.

2. Quotations – Quotations are provided at the beginning and end of each dimension chapter for the purpose of inspiration and reflection.

3. Definition – What Skilled, Less Skilled, and Overuse look like for this dimension of Learning Agility.

4. Some Possible Causes of Lower Skill – We list numerous reasons why you might have this need. Use these to specify what your need looks like exactly.

5. Developmental Difficulty – Each dimension is classified as Easier or Moderate or Harder to develop. This will help you set your expectations regarding the scope and speed of your development.

6. Did You Know? / Does It Best ★ Each dimension is highlighted with research-related insights or a brief portrait of someone who serves as a prime example of skilled behavior.
7. **Tips to Increase Skill** – Research- and experience-based suggestions for actions that you can take to increase effectiveness in each dimension. Choose a few to include in your development plan. Also consult the Resources to Learn More for more tips and deeper understanding.

Look for this symbol for tips on how to avoid *overusing* your skill in each dimension.

8. **Assignments to Practice Skill** – Ideas for ways to pursue developmental opportunities in the dimension both on and off the job.

9. **Take Time to Reflect** – Each chapter closes with a series of thought-provoking questions to inspire further reflection on the dimension and raise your level of self-awareness.

**HOW DO I USE THIS BOOK?**

There are several practices and approaches we find useful for getting the most out of this book:

**Determine the need.** From regular feedback or use of the Learning Agility Architect™ Sort Cards, Quick Score Questionnaire, or Choices™ online assessment, try to determine your current level of Learning Agility and which areas you could benefit from working on. Sometimes even excellent feedback can identify the wrong need. Even if everyone agrees that you have problems managing conflict, the question is “Why?” Maybe the real problem is due to your not being open to others’ opinions or not being able to read people’s reactions. So if none or only a few of the tips for your identified need seem to make sense, check other likely dimensions to see if the need is more likely one of those.

**Get the lay of the land.** Read the map for the dimension at the start of each chapter. The map describes the general case of the behavior, how it operates, and why it’s important. The map sets context and helps clarify what the dimension is all about.

**Specify the need.** Read the Less Skilled definition for the dimension. Which bullet points describe your particular situation best? Look to the Skilled definition. How do you want to act when you have developed in this dimension? This is the before and after picture. Also consider the potential for Overuse.
Ask “Why?” Check the Possible Causes that might apply. Many developmental efforts have floundered because the plan attacked the wrong problem. Causes get to “why” you may have a need in this dimension. Write down your specific need—what it looks like, what causes it, who it plays out with, and in what situations.

Conduct a reality check. Take note of the Developmental Difficulty level of the dimension. Some weaknesses are tougher to fix than others. Knowing the relative difficulty of working on a need will help set you up for success.

Identify the fixes. Look at the Tips to Increase Skill and pick the specific ones that apply. Each topic is written against a specific manifestation of being less skilled at the dimension. It is unlikely that all of the topics or remedies will apply to any person. Pick a few that apply. Start small. Think back to the causes you checked and the “why it’s important” noted from the map.

Seek out more knowledge. Look at the list of recommended Resources to Learn More. They might also be helpful to deepen your understanding on your needs and to help put together the action plan. Complete Web addresses appear in the Resources to Learn More – Web Addresses appendix.

Get ready. Get set… Lay out a plan and a schedule. The plan should include at least three items you will work on immediately. Use the development plan in the back of this book. Measure the number of times you do this or don’t do that and record these efforts so you can track improvement. Set a specific time frame of no more than a month to try these items repeatedly. If the time frame is longer or indefinite, you will be less likely to do anything. Start today.

Begin the journey. Make it a journey of challenge. It’s simply the most effective way to learn. In particular, put these practices to work for maximum learning gain:

Go against your natural grain. We call these GAG (Going Against your natural Grain). GAG because, while it’s great for your development, it’s uncomfortable. If you’re ambitious or if you seek a different kind of job, you’ll have to work on your downsides more vigorously. Few succeed in a different job by simply repeating past successful behavior. This is a strong lesson from career research. You’ll have to stretch in uncomfortable areas. For example, whether you gravitate toward team building or not, you can learn the behaviors of excellent team builders. You might even come to enjoy it. It’s important not to confuse what you like to do with what’s necessary to do.
Test the unknown. Many Learning Agility dimensions you might be low on reflect lack of experience that we call an untested area. Maybe you don’t deal with change well but have never led a change effort. Pick something small that needs doing and give it a try using the tips from the dimensions that are a part of Change Agility.

Seek further feedback. Little happens without feedback tied to a goal. Get a developmental partner, get feedback a year from now on the Choices™ online assessment, ask for a Learning From Experience™ interview, poll people you work with about what you should keep doing, keep doing with slight modifications, stop doing, and start doing.

Finally, remember that Learning Agility is forged by experience. Experiences are needed to provide the seeds for learning and even more experiences are needed to provide opportunities to apply and refine those learnings. So be patient and stay committed to continually embracing, reflecting on, and applying whatever can be gleaned from the many experiences that await you.
Mental Agility

While at first glance it may seem that Mental Agility is synonymous with how smart you are, that’s actually not the case. It turns out that being mentally agile has much more to do with intellectual curiosity than it does with pure intellect. It’s a particular kind of curiosity that drives someone with high Mental Agility. The mentally agile person is propelled by a broad inquisitiveness—which makes them like an intellectual explorer of the world around them. An explorer of ideas, people, history, and the future. They take in more because they are constantly scanning the environment for anything new, anything that could fuel their unquenchable desire to learn something new, to be surprised. When solving problems, this broad perspective enables the mentally agile person to make fresh connections. By accessing their bounty of broad information sources, they uncover the parallels to other things in life. Themes emerge more easily, which leads them to get at the essence or core meaning of the problem, to properly define it—the most important phase to solving anything of complexity. Someone with high Mental Agility isn’t overwhelmed by complexity or ambiguity. On the contrary, the more complex or ambiguous, the greater the challenge to sift through the noisy details and distill them down into understandable themes that can be simply defined and articulated.

DIMENSIONS

- Inquisitive
- Broad Scanner
- Connector
- Essence
- Complexity
- Manages Uncertainty
Creative problem solving starts with making creative connections. Connections uncovered by finding commonality between two or more unrelated knowns. If you restrict yourself to the connections you currently make, you’ll only come up with breakthrough ideas by sheer chance. Or you may end up faced with a situation where there is no obvious connection to lean on. Being a Connector enables you to see beyond the obvious. To look underneath the surface features of an issue, problem, or set of conditions to find the in-common, the patterns, in what seems to be completely unrelated but isn’t. Similar things happen in parallel areas of life. Almost nothing is truly new. Almost everything has already happened. Spotting trends isn’t going to happen by being myopic and only looking insular to your own experience. You can increase your chances of success by learning from the lessons of history and making connections across usually isolated areas. Research of star performers from global companies like Volvo and IBM revealed that the one cognitive ability that distinguished them from average performers was pattern recognition, which allowed them to pick out meaningful trends and use that information to solve future problems.

*In nature we never see anything isolated, but everything in connection with something else which is before it, beside it, under it and over it.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
German playwright, poet, novelist, and dramatist
FACTOR II: MENTAL AGILITY

CONNECTOR

SKILLED
Combines two or more disparate ideas to create something new
Finds parallels, contrasts, and unique combinations
Isn’t afraid to go off on an intellectual tangent and take time
to think through something
Comes up with missing pieces
Finds commonality among seemingly contrasting data
Identifies patterns in seemingly unrelated pieces of information

LESS SKILLED
Focuses on what is readily apparent
May think he/she already
knows the answer
Too quick to act
Doesn’t hunt for fresh
views or solutions
Sees little value in looking for
seemingly obscure parallels

OVERUSE OF SKILL
Doggedly insists that patterns
or themes exist, even when all
evidence is to the contrary
Gets so caught up in connection-
finding that deadlines are missed
Rejects the obvious solution without
due consideration

SOME POSSIBLE CAUSES OF LOWER SKILL
Causes help explain “why” a person may have trouble in this dimension. When
seeking to increase skill, it's helpful to consider how these might play out in
certain situations. And remember that all of these can be addressed if you are
motivated to do so.

Impatient
Intellectually lazy
Limited ways to think
Narrow or disadvantaged
background
Not curious

Rejects speculation
Sticks with the proven
Too specialized
Rigid mental models
Overly focused
Unobservant

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTY
When compared with other dimensions of Learning Agility, this
dimension is moderately difficult to develop.
FACTOR II: MENTAL AGILITY

Did You Know?

A 2003 research study commissioned for the British Broadcasting Company found that self-made millionaires are four times more likely than the rest of us to be dyslexic. The connection to being a Connector? While a person with dyslexia has difficulty analyzing particulars, they are very adept at recognizing patterns.

TIPS TO INCREASE SKILL AS A CONNECTOR

Only seeing the obvious?
Be unconventional.

REMOVE THE RESTRAINTS
Many busy people rely too much on solutions from their own history. They rely on what has happened to them in the past. They see sameness in problems that isn’t there. Beware of “I have always…” or “Usually, I…” Always pause and ask yourself is this really like the problems you have solved in the past? You don’t have to change who you are and what you’re comfortable with other than when you need to be more creative in your thinking. First think, then act, differently; try new things; break free of your restraints.

MAKE YOUR MIND A BIT SILLIER
If you’re driven by logic, you may be limiting your ability to make fresh connections. Don’t be afraid to think illogically for a change. You don’t have to tell anyone what you’re doing. Think about what song this problem is like. Find an analogy to your problem in nature, in children’s toys, in anything that has a physical structure. Engineers once solved an overheating problem by drawing a parallel to what animal trainers do to calm upset or angry animals. Seemingly silly parallels can reveal unique connections.

TAP INTO NON-EXPERTS
During World War II, the military discovered the most creative groups were those where the members had little or nothing in common and knew little about the issue. Their freewheeling approach yielded fresher solutions. They were not trapped by the past. Experts in strategic planning often use this tactic today to ensure they are bringing in the broadest way to look at how future scenarios may take shape. Take a current challenge to the most disparate group you can find (a historian, a college student, a theologian, a salesperson, a plumber, etc.) and see what insights they have into it. Find some problems outside of your area and see what you can add.
FACTOR II: MENTAL AGILITY

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

Too focused on a solution?
Think it through.

AVOID A QUICK MOVE TO SOLUTIONING
One reason people jump to solutions based on what has worked in the past is impatience. Life is a balance between waiting and doing. Many in management put a premium on doing over waiting. Most of us could make close to 100% good decisions, given all of the data and unlimited time. Life affords us neither the data nor the time. Try to discipline yourself to wait just a little longer than you usually do to come up with a solution. Push yourself to always look at one more piece of data than you did before. You’ll find that what you sacrifice in speed, you gain in quality of the solution.

Ensuring you have a good understanding of a problem before solving preemptively is certainly a good thing, but slowing down to a snail’s pace is not. When tackling problems and ideas creatively, be sure to balance thorough analysis with a bias for action.

DEFINE THE PROBLEM
Fresh connections don’t occur in a vacuum. You need information so you have something to go on. When solving problems, start with figuring out what causes it in the first place. See how many causes you can come up with and how many organizing buckets you can put them in. Many of us just collect data, which numerous studies show increases our confidence but doesn’t increase decision accuracy. Think out loud with others, see how they view the problem. Studies show that defining the problem and taking action usually occur simultaneously, so to break out of analysis paralysis, figure out what the problem is first. Then, when a good alternative appears, you’re likely to recognize it immediately.

TAKE TIME TO ASK QUESTIONS
Instead of just doing it, ask what questions would need to be answered before we’d know which way to go. Too often, we think first and only of solutions. In studies of problem-solving sessions, solutions outweigh questions eight to one. When thinking through problems creatively with others, it’s typical for the meeting to start with people offering solutions. Often, others haven’t even understood the problem yet! Plus, early solutions are not likely to be the best. So set aside the first 50% of the time for questions and problem definition and
the last 50% of the time for solutions. Asking more questions early helps you rethink the problem and come to more and different solutions.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

Trouble connecting the dots?
Start seeing the patterns in things.

EXPLORE THE IN-COMMONS
Look for patterns and commonalities across seemingly unrelated stories, events, or circumstances. The broader your outlook, the more patterns you are likely to see. Look for patterns everywhere: in your personal life, your organization, or the world when analyzing general successes and failures. What was common to each success or what was present in each failure but never present in a success? Focus more on the successes; failures are easier to analyze but don’t in themselves tell you what would have worked. Comparing successes, while less exciting, yields more information about underlying principles. The bottom line is to reduce your insights to principles or rules of thumb you think might be repeatable. When faced with the next new problem, those general underlying principles will apply again.

HUNT FOR REMOTE PARALLELS
Parallels exist everywhere—in your own business, in other organizations, and in remote areas totally outside your field. Parallels aren’t necessarily best practices, which come and go. Instead, find a parallel situation to the underlying issue you are solving—like who has to do things really fast (Domino’s Pizza, FedEx)? Who has to deal with maximum ambiguity (emergency rooms, a newspaper, police dispatchers)? Achievements in innovation can be another great source for parallels. Study a few well-known inventions of the past, like the automobile (The Machine That Changed the World by James Womack and associates at MIT is an excellent source). See how several unrelated inventions came together to form a bigger one.
USE HISTORY AS A GUIDE
If you feel stuck in the present, start seeing what patterns emerge from history. There are always plenty of candidates. U.S. president Harry Truman used the presidential archives to form a “council of presidents” to see what his predecessors had done in parallel situations to the issues he was facing. Studying the biographies of three creative people without regard to their field can be a great source of inspiration as well. See what processes they shared in common that helped them be more creative in their thinking and what kinds of unique connections they were able to make as a result.

Once you begin seeing the power of making new connections, it can be tempting to expect to find them in every situation. It’s important to keep in mind that overcomplicating a topic for the sake of hunting for connections and patterns needs to have a payoff attached. And that sometimes the obvious solution is the best one.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

ASSIGNMENTS TO PRACTICE SKILL
Work in a strategic planning role or on a cross-functional project that will provide you with lots of fodder to make fresh connections, analyze multiple new ideas, and devise new ways of looking at old problems.

Start something new. To be successful, you’ll need to find parallels between your new venture or situation and examples from the world around you and then make connections that will help you forge ahead.

Work on a team tasked with fixing something that has failed. You can bring in lessons about others’ failures and successes, connect the in-commons with your situation, and use that knowledge to strategize how to solve what needs fixing.
TAKE TIME TO REFLECT…
Here are some questions to reflect on as you focus on being a Connector. Think about how you might answer these today and how, through using the tips in this chapter, you might achieve a better result in the future.

Think about people or companies you admire. What is it that draws you to them? What do they all have in common?

How often do you have your solution already in mind before any real exploration of a new problem has begun? What is the impact?

When was the last time you made a connection that was so exciting it gave you goose bumps?

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*Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought.*

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi
Hungarian physiologist and winner of the Nobel Prize in medicine
What makes someone a High Potential?
Leaders of today and tomorrow need to be better than the leaders they replace because the challenges are greater, the speed faster, the competition tougher, and the marketplace increasingly global. In short, the leaders of today and tomorrow must be agile leaders, resourceful in the face of change, and above all, able to learn from experience. People with this ability perform well under first-time, challenging conditions. These people are learning agile.

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