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Learning Agility Equals Leadership Success

By [John R. Ryan](#) on February 27, 2009

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Back in my early twenties, the U.S. Navy taught me how to fly airplanes. It took some work, but we had great coaches. Under their direction, it wasn't long before my fellow rookie pilots and I were mastering takeoffs, landings, formation flying, and all the complex steps in between. Then they told us the next challenge was landing on aircraft carriers.

If you've never tried to do this, I'll tell you what an aircraft carrier looks like from 20,000 feet: pretty damn small. We practiced, and after a couple weeks of practice and feedback from our coaches, the moment of truth finally arrived. It was time to actually land on an aircraft carrier. There's no room for error. Your only option was to bring the plane down exactly right.

Certainly we trained hard for that moment. But in all honesty, no amount of practice on the ground can prepare you for landing on an aircraft carrier at sea. You have to account for shifting winds, for the fact the ship is rocking in the water and so forth. If you are planning to pull this off, you need to think quickly. You need to adapt and react—very, very quickly.

What you need is learning agility.

How to Cultivate Agile Learning Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger (longtime friends of the Center for Creative Leadership) explored this trait in their book *The Leadership Machine*. Agile learners, their research found, thrive in new and difficult situations. They are clear thinkers who know themselves well and like to

experiment. They also like to learn and can quickly apply new knowledge. Most importantly—and not surprisingly—agile learners deliver results, even in new situations.

This is the kind of person we all need to be as leaders, particularly during the terrible economic climate we're in now. But no matter how learning agile you are, you're not going to make all the right calls yourself, whether you're in charge of 10 people or 50,000. So it's equally important to develop agile learners at all levels of your organization.

How do you do that? In my experience there are three particularly important elements. I try to practice them each day and encourage the men and women I'm privileged to work with to do the same. First, you need a rock-solid commitment to learning. Second, it's critical to put yourself in challenging situations. Finally, you must be relentless in seeking and accepting feedback about your performance.

Look for Challenges Developing a commitment to learning is tougher than it sounds. Leaders are busy people with constant demands on their time and attention. It's one thing to consider talking with clients about their needs or reading a thought-provoking book or taking a course to sharpen your skills. But how often do you actually make the time to do these things? The best leaders and top performers are always hungry for new knowledge and experiences.

In addition to soaking up new information all the time, agile learners look for challenges. Pushing yourself out of your comfort zone can be a little daunting if you're accustomed to success. But it is undeniably one of the best ways to build confidence and to keep yourself engaged with your work. You get to test your existing skills and learn about the ones you need to add. Eleanor Roosevelt is one of the leaders I most admire, largely because she had a phenomenal desire to challenge herself. She started a family with Franklin D. Roosevelt at a young age, giving birth to six children.

But as her family grew, so did Eleanor Roosevelt's desire to help others by fiercely pushing societal boundaries. She redefined the role of First Lady and became, as Doris Kearns Goodwin has written, "the first woman to speak in front of a national convention, to write a syndicated column, to earn money as a lecturer, to be a radio commentator, and to hold regular press conferences." A lot of people resented her success, but she had the courage not to care. Ultimately, she marshaled the many leadership skills she developed through her work—vision, communication, and collaboration among others—in support of her greatest passions of all: advancing the civil rights and women's movements. Decades later, her groundbreaking work continues to help open doors for men and women all over the U.S.

Use Constructive Feedback So agile learners must constantly add to their knowledge. They must challenge themselves to develop new skills and horizons. And they shouldn't forget about a final but equally important element: getting constant feedback on how they are doing and applying it daily to their performance as leaders.

Here it's instructive to reflect on Kurt Warner, the resurgent quarterback who recently took the Arizona Cardinals all the way to the Super Bowl. Warner has had many successful seasons in the National Football League. But in recent years he struggled a good bit, with mediocre performance and too much time on the bench.

Cardinals head coach Ken Whisenhunt told him why: He was taking too many sacks and committing too many turnovers. He also told Warner point-blank that he'd be on the bench all season if he didn't improve in those areas. Warner is a very coachable player, and he did what professionals do when they get good, if stern, advice. He listened to it. He made protecting the football a top priority and ended the season with 30

touchdowns against just 14 interceptions, resurrecting his career in the process. Warner asked what he needed to do to get better. He got very clear guidance. He acted on it and led an underdog team to within a mere few points of a world championship.

That's the power of learning agility. It's often the difference between average and superior performance. And in these treacherous economic times, leaders need as much of it as they can get.

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