Learning Agility: Leader Development and Mission Command

by

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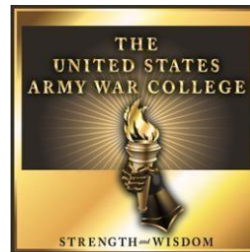
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The US Army is currently in a period of reflection and transition after fourteen years of conflict. In previous conflicts, the nation leveraged its industrial base to maintain a decisive edge over the enemy. Material solutions are not enough to maintain a decisive edge in a future of strategic uncertainty and rapidly adapting adversaries.[1] The US Army must maintain its decisive edge by investing into its most valued commodity, the leaders of its irreplaceable Soldiers. The US Army Human Dimension Strategy provides a comprehensive plan to assist the US Army in developing agile and adaptive leaders of character capable of successfully leading the US Army as it transitions into a globally responsive, agile and lethal ground force.[2] This is a new strategic challenge for the Army. Prior to the Global War of Terror, the US Army developed leaders to fight a known conventional enemy, with a known doctrinal order of battle, on a known battlefield. Since September 11, 2001 US Army forces have been deploying to relatively unknown environments in which leaders must quickly gain an understanding of rapidly developing, complex, and chaotic situations while collaborating with joint, interagency, and coalition partners to build a cohesive team and achieve operational success.[3] In fact, we can safely assume that this trend will continue in the future.

The 2015 National Security Strategy describes future threats ranging from continued Russian aggression, cyber-attacks, violent extremism, terrorism both abroad and on the homeland, and infectious diseases.[4] More than ever before, the US Army needs agile leaders capable of rapidly learning from previous experiences and applying relevant lessons learned to evolving complex situations.

This paper documents why the US Army should strive to understand and measure Learning Agility in order to develop agile and adaptive leaders capable of leading within a Mission Command structure and winning in a complex world. Former US Army War College Fellow, LTC Alan Boyer, introduced Learning Agility to the US Army in his 2015 Civilian Research Paper titled "The Strategic Leadership Development Challenge: Learning Agility and Mission Command."[5] This paper is a continuation of his research.

Learning Agility

At the cutting edge of Learning Agility research is Dr. W. Warner Burke, the Edward Lee Thorndike Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Learning Agility is a relatively new concept. For years researchers have studied the ability to learn which consists of an individual's ability and willingness to learn from a previous experience and implement relevant lessons learned to new situations. The concept of Learning Agility sheds light on why some individuals learn faster and display more flexibility in their learning.[6] There are two primary components to Learning Agility; skill and motivation. The skill component consists of how an individual distinguishes whether what one learned from a previous experience is applicable to a new and different experience.[7] The motivation component is an individual's willingness to take both performance and interpersonal risk when faced with a situation in which one does not necessarily know what to do or what the outcome of ones actions might be.[8] Thus, Learning Agility is a "combination of motivation – being willing to face new and perhaps ambiguous situations by taking actions that help one to stay engaged"…and "the skill to discern quickly the consequences of these actions

determining what to do next in order to continue the process of learning."[9] Dr. Burke's

Learning Agility Inventory measures the observable behaviors determined to be

associated with Learning Agility. There are a total of thirty-eight behaviors that are

clustered into nine dimensions: feedback seeking, information seeking, performance

risk taking, interpersonal risk taking, collaborating, experimenting, reflecting, flexibility,

and speed.[10] Thus, if these behaviors can be measured, then leaders can be

developed to strengthen these behaviors.[11] To better understand Learning Agility one

needs to understand two theoretical frameworks for learning: the Experiential Learning

Theory and Learning Goal Orientation.

Theoretical Framework

An individual's ability to learn from experience is fundamental to leadership

success.[12] Academic literature states that learning is a process in which a learning-agile

individual will most likely demonstrate a series of behaviors which increase the

opportunities in which learning will occur.[13] These behaviors are derived from David

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Carol Dweck's Learning Goal Orientation

theories.

According to Kolb, agile learners navigate through four modes of learning;

observation and experience (CE; concrete experience), reflection (RO; reflective

observation), forming hypotheses and theories (AC; abstract conceptualization), and

acting in a particular manner based on one's understanding (AE; active

experimentation).[14] It is rare that individuals master all four modes of learning. Some

individuals may prefer learning from actually performing the task at hand. Others may

prefer to learn through reflection. For example, concrete experience and active

experimentation are different modes of grasping information from an experience, and reflective observation and abstract conceptualization are different modes of transforming the information gained from the experience into knowledge.[15] Kolb argues that individuals will choose one of four learning styles depending on their abilities and preference to learning: accommodators (AC & AE), divergers (CE & RO), assimilators (RO & AC), and convergers (AC &AE).[16] Accommodators intuitively grasp information and favor being action oriented. Accommodators tend to seek new experiences and are more willing to take prudent risk using trial and error. Divergers tend to intuitively grasp information and then attempt to make sense of their feelings. Divergers view problem sets from numerous perspectives and tend to formulate several different possible solutions. Assimilators focus on the logic of an argument and use inductive reasoning to create theories. Lastly, convergers combine thinking and action into problem solving, decision making, and pragmatism.[17]
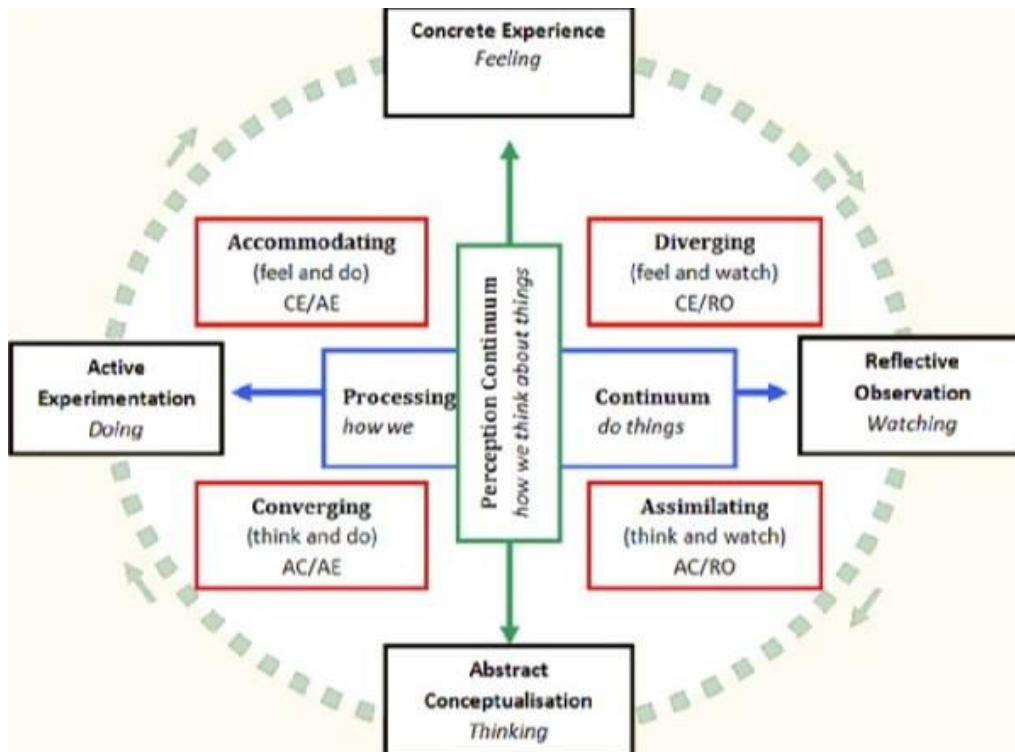
Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory model.[18]

Therefore, if leaders understand Kolb's four learning styles they can leverage the knowledge to better coach, teach and mentor subordinates in a manner which allows them to learn in a way that suits them best. Leaders can also assist subordinates in identifying the lesser preferred style of learning and strengthen those skills to develop them into more agile learners. While Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory addresses the skill component of Learning Agility it is Carol Dweck's Learning Goal Orientation Theory that sheds light on the motivation component.

Studies shows that certain experiences are essential to leader development, and so, understanding an individual's willingness to seek out and be open to new and challenging experiences becomes an important aspect of identifying and developing talent.[19] Carol Dweck's research suggests that individuals approach new tasks in one of two ways; either to develop competence or to demonstrate competence. Individuals that are goal oriented tend to approach a task or challenge with a mindset of learning or developing competence. Individuals that are motivated to demonstrate their competence tend to favor performance goal orientation.[20] Dweck's research shows that individuals that are learning goal oriented tend to demonstrate more tolerance in ambiguous situations, are more thoughtful of others, open to new and different perspectives, and are more persistent in the face of difficult or adverse situations. Whereas, performance oriented individuals lack tolerance for ambiguity, lack thoughtfulness, and tend to avoid complex and challenging situations or tasks.[21] More learning occurs for individuals that are more willing to seek new and challenging experiences. Individuals that tend to demonstrate the behaviors specific to learning

goal orientation will tend to be more learning agile. One can make a reasonable assumption, that learning goal oriented leaders are more likely to successfully lead their units in ambiguous and complex situations and exercise Mission Command.

The research literature demonstrates that agile learners demonstrate a range of attributes and competences that are ideal for US Army leaders. Agile learners tend to display the motivation to seek out and learn from new and challenging experiences, and seek feedback from others. The agile learner is also effective at absorbing and processing relevant information, integrating new ideas, developing multiple courses of action, and willing to experiment with new methods.[22]

Learning Agility: Developing Leaders and Mission Command

In General Mark A. Miley's statement to the force, he stated, "the Army must have an openness to new ideas and ways of doing things in an increasingly complex world," and the Army "will change and adapt.[23] It is clear that the Army needs leaders that can successfully lead diverse teams comprised of joint and coalition partners in ambiguous and complex situations. The behaviors associated with Learning Agility are compatible to those desired of US Army leaders. Until now the US Army has not had the means of measuring and developing agility. Dr. Burke's Learning Agility Inventory and research provides the US Army that ability.

The challenge for senior leaders is creating a command climate that encourages and rewards the behaviors associated with Learning Agility. Leaders must be open to new ideas and encourage subordinates to take risks by seeking out challenging tasks without fear of failure. Elaine D. Pulakos' research on adaptability in the work place reminds us that while new and challenging experiences are ideal for learning in a work

environment, they will also create anxiety and stress to perform. When leaders and individuals do not manage the stress effectively, learning is less likely to occur during and after the experience.[24] The US Army will always be a performance focused organization because of the nature of the profession of arms. Leaders need to continue to conduct realistic training that induces physical and mental stress. It is imperative that Soldiers continue to be trained to perform under stress. It's the leader's responsibility to manage the amount of pressure or stress within the organization to allow learning and development to occur in leaders, small units, and organizations. Furthermore, leaders must be capable of establishing a climate in which subordinates can safely experiment and take risks with new ideas to optimize their development.

Training and Doctrine Command is implementing initiatives to increase research efforts, in partnership with academic institutions, to better understand human capability development, leader development, and talent management. [25] The Human Dimension Capabilities Development Task Force white paper on Person-Organization Fit and Mission Command also recommends that, "the Army should conduct an analytical review of the existing leadership doctrine in order to identify those leader attributes most essential for the effective practice of Mission Command."[26] The need and the desire exists to further research and understand Learning Agility. The set of attributes and competencies related to Learning Agility are applicable to US Army Leader Development and Mission Command doctrine.

The Way Ahead

1. LTG Brown, Commander, Combined Arms Center, gave guidance to

formalize the relationship with Teachers College, Columbia University in order to leverage Dr. Burke's research on Learning Agility. LTG Brown is interested in understanding what types of experiences develop agile leaders (October 7, 2015).

2. On December 4, 2015, Dr. Burke will travel to the US Army War College to discuss the research methodology with the Dean of the War College. A multi-rater and self-assessment survey will be distributed to a sample population of 160 students at the US Army War College on or about December 1, 2015. Students will have until the end of February 2016 to complete the surveys.   The data will be collected and analyzed with the results scheduled to be published in May 2016. Dr. Burke will travel to the US Army War College to give students a briefing on the results and Learning Agility.

3. Based on the results, further theses and hypotheses will be formed or refined to continue research for increased strategic impacts on future Army leaders.

Endnotes

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