



## Deepening the talent pool through Learning agility

Too many promising people fail when promoted to higher levels of leadership because they can't shift their mindsets. But developing learning agility – the ability to learn from experience – can unlock the supply of future leaders

**A**rguably the most significant problem when attempting to develop a talent pool able to meet the demands of today's and tomorrow's business is the talent drain that occurs at key transition points in careers. As we try to convert high performers at one level into successful business leaders at the next, a significant number do not make the grade. And the more pivotal the position, the more acute this challenge becomes.

When exploring the learning agility idea and examining how practice on the ground is shaping and refining it, three key propositions emerge:

- high learning agility is a key predictor of future success;
- we need to be brave enough to look beyond today's high achievers;
- to build learning agility we need to think about talent and development in a more creative – and disruptive – way.

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### PROPOSITION 1

#### High learning agility is a key predictor of future success

**ONE OF THE PARADOXES** of talent management is that the mindset and values that worked so well in the previous role are no longer the keys to success in the new one. For example, some of the behaviours, mindsets and “winning formulas” that make a successful middle manager (such as a single-minded drive to deliver targets) can be counterproductive at a more senior level. The ability to change these winning formulas and learn how to respond to a new situation is known as learning agility.

Let's take a step back for a moment. More broadly, our ability to adapt to a change is related to three variables (see *chart, facing page*). These are cognitive intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ) and learning agility (LQ).

There are many variants on this formulation in the literature: for example, Lombardo and Eichinger identify six “Q”s, including technical/operational quotient (TQ), motivational quotient (MQ) and experience quotient (XQ); while Povah and Sobczak refer to five, including VQ (values) and DQ (drive). But for this article I shall stick to just three.

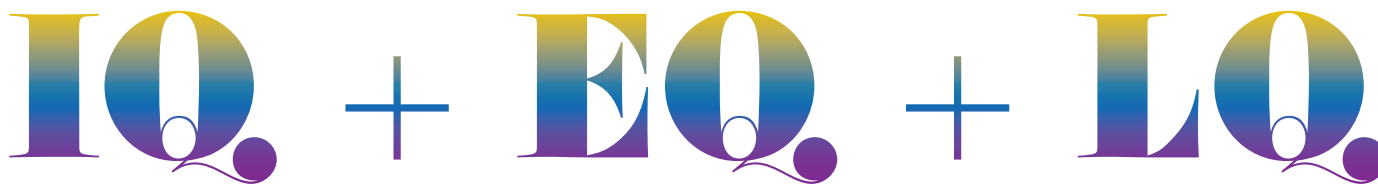
IQ in this context is about classical intelligence. It defines the ability to take on new ideas and to grasp new ways of doing things.

EQ is also relatively well understood by most organisations. From the time it was popularised by Daniel Goleman, it has generally been well defined in competency frameworks. Most HR practitioners are aware of the research that demonstrates the fundamental link between EQ and success in most leadership roles. And of course EQ is critical in times of change.

LQ, however, is often the missing link and most frequently suffers from a lack of investment. LQ is the ability to learn and adapt to new situations. More specifically:

- LQ is about the ability of a leader to adapt the way they think and respond to any given situation;
- it is also about bringing the best of what they know from past experience to any given situation – while remaining inquisitive and open;
- above all it is about being psychologically adaptable and able to challenge our existing mental models of how we see the world as our context changes.

And of course, this is a difficult process. All of us develop a set of beliefs about the world that make up our world view. The reason most of us have lower learning agility than we could have is because the more successful we are, the more this world view, or winning formula, becomes ingrained. Breaking out of it is no easy matter. It requires us to become naive again, to make mistakes, to really inquire – but to do so in a way that holds on to and integrates our existing world view and picture of what makes us successful.



IQ REFERS TO THE COGNITIVE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND AND MAKE SENSE OF INFORMATION, GENERATE IDEAS AND SOLVE PROBLEMS

EQ FOCUSES ON THE AWARENESS OF, AND ABILITY TO MANAGE, OUR OWN EMOTIONS AND THOSE OF OTHERS. IT HAS BEEN SHOWN TO BE CRITICAL IN INFLUENCING AND BUILDING LOYALTY IN OTHERS

LQ IS ABOUT THE ABILITY TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCES AND TO APPLY THAT LEARNING TO NEW AND DIFFERENT SITUATIONS

CHART 1

**⑦ The three variables influencing our ability to adapt to change**

Does this matter? Learning agility is still a relatively new construct, and subject to considerable debate, but there is a growing body of research linking it directly with managerial success. For example, when compared with IQ and personality, Connolly and Viswesvaran found leaders with high LQ had the edge in both performance and promotability. Other studies show similar results.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for these results is offered in a recent paper by Povah and Sobczak, who describe learning agility as the “integrative element” that allows leaders to make the most of all the other kinds of intelligence available to them. And the more significant this integrative role is seen to be, the more critical learning agility becomes to enable leaders to apply their talents in new situations. Which means that building learning agility can significantly reduce the level of talent drain at transitions.

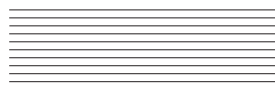
Over the past 15 years, businesses have become increasingly adept at developing EQ. In our work at Bridge we are increasingly coming across clients who are using instruments to measure LQ. But measuring learning agility is one thing. What about developing it? A few organisations today are explicitly developing LQ, which they see as the new frontier for learning and development professionals.

**PROPOSITION 2**

**There’s a strong case for focusing on ‘the magnificent middle’**

**WE NEED TO LOOK** below today’s high achievers and focus on transition points further down the organisation – all too often the winning formula that drives them today

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undermines them as they move up the organisation. The world has taught them that if they keep doing what they are doing they will be successful. And because they have been successful they’ve had this winning formula consistently reinforced. This means that the correlation between success at middle management and success at senior management may not be as high as we think.

Learning agility is an antidote to this natural human tendency. And there is little correlation between LQ and IQ. This means that LQ can both be found in, and used to unlock, what some writers have described as “the magnificent middle” of organisations. These are the solid performers who may have peaked already, or are not considered to be so-called top talent. If we can unlock the ability of the magnificent middle to become more able and motivated to learn new ways of doing things, then the potential impact on releasing larger numbers of potential leaders becomes very interesting.

It is possible to develop each person’s LQ by using some simple mechanisms for surfacing the big beliefs that drive our way of doing business. These then need to be held up to scrutiny and tested for the extent to which they hold water in the new world. For example, at Bridge we teach people to identify key leadership trigger points, and their response to them, and to use these events to uncover the critical beliefs that frame the way they see the world.

In this way we also activate the “inquisitive gene” that can quickly become dormant in the pressured world of work. Once unlocked, inquisitiveness feeds itself – but it takes some real effort and clever methods to make it more than a fleeting state. »»»

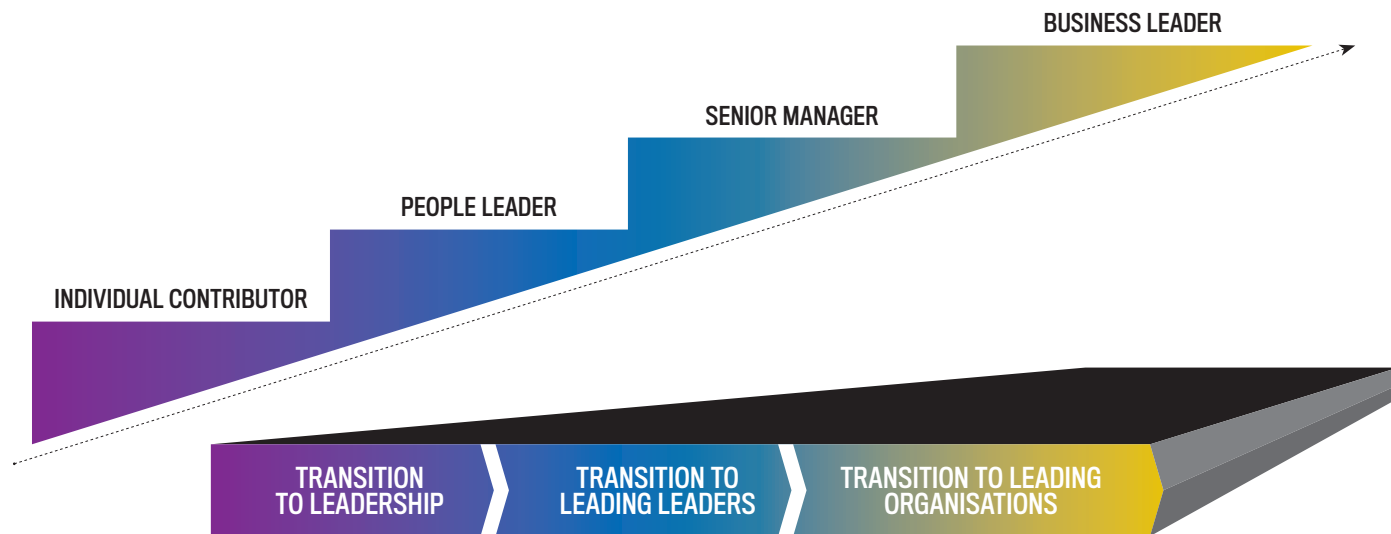


CHART 2

🕒 **Stepping up through key transitions**

<p><b>Problem solver to strategic architect (tangible and immediate to intangible and emergent)</b></p>	<p><b>External goal focus to internal purpose focus</b></p>	<p><b>From a focus on personal impact to communicating our personal presence</b></p>
<p>Senior managers are generally solving problems or leading changes. This is about focus, drive and the here and now. Business leaders often need to think outside of tangible goals, to spot patterns in the market that others don't see and to be able to dance between apparently contradictory messages. It is as much about the future as it is the here and now</p>	<p>Beyond the obvious external goals of growth and profit (the goal-oriented mindset that makes for many successful senior leaders), a business leader needs to find their own sense of purpose and use it to shape the organisation's future if they are to truly win the hearts-and-minds battle of staff and customers. The mindset transition is about letting go of succeeding on other's terms and feeling confident in creating our own sense of future</p>	<p>The more senior we are, the less people really know us and the more they follow us based on perception. The mindset shift lies in recognising this, in not expecting to be 'understood' – or trying to create a 'popular' brand – but rather to find ways of projecting a presence that fits with and is authentic to the leader's own values</p>

CHART 3

🕒 **Mindset shifts needed in one of the transitions: from senior manager to business leader**

One of the key things we have found about learning agility is that it needs to be developed in a way that directly links with the current transition people are going through. Most HR professionals are familiar with, and used to working with, certain key transitions as individuals move up the organisation. The CIPD's own HR profession map articulates three key transitions between the four bands of professional competence.

More generally, key transitions include: from individual contributor to people leader; from people leader to senior manager; and from senior manager to business leader. As an example, the table above sets out in more detail, from our experience, the key mindset shifts involved in a successful transition from senior manager to business leader.

In a world dominated by competencies and the search for the “rounded executive”, it can be easy to overlook or under-

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estimate the importance of these transitions and their required shifts in mindset. But when we take time to help the leader to unpick them, and learn how to change the way they see the world, we are not only helping them with their immediate transition. We are also helping them to develop the learning agility they will need to navigate future business and personal transitions.

**PROPOSITION 3**  
**We need a more creative and disruptive approach to talent and development**

**ORGANISATIONS TEND** naturally to be conservative places and are also notoriously good at borrowing ideas and

approaches from each other. This is often no bad thing. However, it does mean that a lot of organisations are running highly professional and polished talent programmes that are not inspiring or dynamic enough to unlock the heart and get people excited and equipped for the next big leap in their career. New leaders need new methods. Learning agility needs different learning approaches.

## CASE STUDY Cadbury's Leading for Performance programme

A great example of a business that has done this is Cadbury/Kraft. Cadbury launched the Leading for Performance (LfP) programme in 2009 with pilots in India and the UK. By the end of this year, 18 such events will have been held for around 270 senior leaders in countries ranging from Thailand and Ghana to the US and France. Facilitated by Bridge, the programme lasts nine months and involves delegates and their line managers taking part in an integrated programme that includes an on-the-job challenge, a “720-degree” assessment (basically a 360-degree workplace assessment, but also including feedback from friends and family) and professional telephone coaching.

The most important aspect of this programme is its ability to deliver a disruptive experience in order to trigger the sort of mindset shifts that encourage learning agility.

Two other aspects of the LfP programme were also interesting in terms of learning agility.

First, many people will be familiar with the 70:20:10 principle – namely that 70 per cent of the value of learning takes place on the job, 20 per cent through coaching and 10 per cent through courses. But knowing this principle and using it effectively are two very different things. The Cadbury programme was designed to get the most of the 70 per cent and the 20 per cent.

Second, we wanted to end the disconnection that is often apparent between the personal leadership journey of individuals and its application in the business. Most of us have a lot of experience – the trick is really learning from it. And, of course, because learning agility is all about learning from experience in different ways, the 70 per cent of learning on the job is key.

Cadbury sought to root its leadership programme in the business by linking it to a specific leadership challenge in the business for each person. This was signed off with the line manager as a core key performance indicator – one demanding that the delegate demonstrate the necessary skills. The programme then focused the delegate on succeeding in this challenge. Coaching was specifically targeted at ensuring the individual learnt from this.

Cadbury believed that although most organisations encourage coaching, very little of the coaching that happens triggers the requisite mindset shifts. Over its nine months, the LfP programme included:

### LINKS & NOTES

▶ [bridge-partnership.com](http://bridge-partnership.com)

▶ References to authors mentioned in this feature are included with the online version, at [peoplemanagement.co.uk/learnagility](http://peoplemanagement.co.uk/learnagility)

▶ **CIPD Training** The postgraduate certificate in talent and career management [cipd.co.uk/training/pccm](http://cipd.co.uk/training/pccm)

▶ Have you found ways to stimulate ‘mindset shifts’ in L&D? What has made an impact on you personally? Share your experience on PM’s LinkedIn Group at [peoplemanagement.co.uk/linkedin](http://peoplemanagement.co.uk/linkedin)

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- An innovative telephone-based coaching methodology that used professional coaches alongside a rich curriculum of stimulus and content to trigger the personal transition at work. The coaching introduced key LQ tools such as how to surface and challenge underlying beliefs.

- Line managers also received the coaching. The organisation made it clear that if a line manager wanted their high-potential leader to take part in the programme, they also had to sign up for three coaching sessions themselves. This meant that line managers were given the tools and confidence to play an active role in supporting and embedding the change.

One part of the LfP experience that has a particular impact for delegates, as a way of facilitating the necessary disruptive experience, is the five-day core event that takes place halfway through the programme. Most regions opt to run this in conjunction with a “community partner” – typically a charity or community group. Delegates are given five days – interspersed with workshop input and intense coaching – to solve a knotty strategic challenge for their community partner.

For example, Cadbury cohorts in the UK have worked with a number of paralympic sports bodies, supporting them with their strategies in the lead up to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London. Globally, cohorts have worked with a diverse list of community partners, from an orphanage in Bangkok and an award-winning rural development charity in south-east India to a New Jersey rehabilitation charity for ex-offenders and a cocoa-growing community in Ghana.

The benefits have been immensely worthwhile – for both the community partners and Cadbury.

Through leading a project with diverse stakeholders and where the strategy is not predetermined, Cadbury leaders are being forced to examine their beliefs about themselves and about the nature of strategic ability. They get to experience a learning agility shift first hand. One delegate commented: “The programme has been a transformational experience. It has touched me in a very unexpected way that makes me think I was blind before.”

The Cadbury experience is a good example of how organisations are becoming increasingly creative and provocative in the way they make use of disruptive learning experiences to help people experience tomorrow today.

### CONCLUSION

## Challenging how we see the world

**IN OUR RELENTLESS SEARCH** to win the competition for talent, it will always be important for HR professionals to focus on the talent that gets lost at key career transition points. Learning agility seems to be an important lens in understanding how to minimise this. But because learning agility is rooted in “changing the way others see the world”, it’s a tough element to master. Perhaps inevitably, mastering this challenge seems to be demanding that we in HR also challenge the way we see the world. **PM**