When was the last time...

...you took on a job, assignment, or project where the scope, expectations, and needed skills were crystal clear from the outset? Where you knew everything you needed to know to be successful? Where there were no gaps, no uncertainties?

In the increasingly complex world of work and beyond, it’s unlikely that you can walk into any role knowing it all. What’s more likely is that you will be faced with new situations, assignments, or challenges where there is more unknown than known and the unknown could trip you up if you’re not prepared.

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Becoming an Agile Leader
Know what to do...
when you don't know what to do

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For the sake of linguistic simplicity in this product, where the masculine form is used, the feminine form should always be understood to be included.

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To help get you started, here’s how the book is organized:

The first chapter, "Learning Agility Unveiled," explores what it means to be an agile learner, the risks of sticking solely with the familiar, and how an agile learning orientation compares to being more focused on mastery or deep expertise.

The remainder of the book is organized around the five key elements, or factors, of Learning Agility: Self-Awareness, Mental Agility, People Agility, Change Agility, and Results Agility. The ordering of these chapters is purposeful. We begin with Self-Awareness because it is becoming clear in the research literature that for any meaningful or long-lasting change to occur, development must begin with a solid understanding of yourself.4

Each Learning Agility factor chapter is divided into two sections. The chapters begin with a portrait of a well-known person whose life parallels the traits and behaviors of that particular agility. The first section goes on to describe what the agility is all about, why it matters, and how you can see it in yourself or others.

The second section of each Learning Agility factor chapter focuses on how you can sharpen each agility, including tips that you can take action on now, what may be getting in your way, some on- and off-the-job roles to build and practice, dangers of overusing an agility, and suggested readings to further explore the agility.

We trust you will find value in gaining a clearer understanding of what it means to be learning agile and how, depending on your career and life aspirations, Learning Agility can help you achieve what you’re looking for.
The ability and willingness to learn from experience, and subsequently apply that learning to perform successfully under new or first-time conditions.
Learning Agility Unveiled
"Every day I’m learning something new."

Sir Richard Branson – Founder, Virgin Group
How Do You Know What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do?

“My biggest motivation? Just to keep challenging myself. I see life almost like one long university education that I never had—every day I’m learning something new.” These words were said by Sir Richard Branson, entrepreneur and owner of Virgin Group.

From the early days of his storied life and career, Richard Branson has been on a quest—a quest to learn. To learn new things, different things, things that challenge him. His entrepreneurial career path has been the opposite of linear. Virgin was initially born from an alternative music magazine, but from there the company, driven by Branson’s curiosity and zeal to take on the unfamiliar, has followed a growth course that is anything but ordinary—from recording company, to retail music stores, then a leap to airlines, rail, telecommunications, banking, even space travel.

Branson’s decision to start Virgin Atlantic Airways illustrates his drive to explore, experiment, and as he puts it, “create new things.” Virgin Atlantic was not conceived from an intense vetting process of poring over business scenarios and financial models, but from a burst of inspiration from Branson. After a particularly frustrating incident when he waited on hold for
hours for an airline customer service representative to help him, Branson decided he could do a better job of this himself. Of all the challenges he had taken on, this was arguably the riskiest and farthest from his comfort zone. But he did it. As with all his ventures, there were stumbles, setbacks, and failed attempts, but today Virgin Airlines is a force to be reckoned with in the airline industry.

An avid reader, Branson considers his education to be “an education of life.” By his own account, he’s “gotten involved with a lot of different things” which has allowed him to expand his perspective, stretch himself, and grow as a result. Branson continues to amass learnings and lessons from his experiences that help equip him as he continues his journey. No one today is really surprised when Branson announces his latest venture or idea—he’s made a brand out of pushing himself and Virgin to places that may seem hard to conceive of but that he somehow makes into a reality.

Learning something new. Pushing himself. Looking at things differently. Deliberately seeking out the unfamiliar and figuring out how to get things done when the challenge is new. These qualities in Richard Branson and others like him are found in a particular kind of learner—an agile learner. And with the world around us becoming increasingly complex it seems with each passing day, agility as a learner can make a big difference. Knowing or figuring out what to do in new, challenging situations when you don’t, at first, know what to do can help equip you for the change and complexity that is likely to come your way in your career and in life.
Why Not Stick with What You Know?

It’s tempting really. Especially if what you know has never steered you wrong before. The reason so many of us fall back on our favorite solutions is we’ve had a lot of success with them in the past. But as the future becomes increasingly complex, chances are you will eventually face a situation where your tried-and-true solutions and decision rationales may fall short.

Take the case of Dick Fuld, long-time CEO of Lehman Brothers before its collapse as part of the financial meltdown in 2008. Fuld had a single-minded objective—to keep the company independent. And he had a successful precedent to work from. He had steered the 100-plus-year-old company through a previous storm 10 years earlier when a giant hedge fund, Long-Term Capital Management, went under. In that case, Fuld was able to renegotiate loans and secure new capital to ride out the storm. So he figured his successful strategy from that past situation would work again in 2008. Fuld applied what he looked at as proven solutions to a situation that, it turned out, didn’t have the same characteristics. His experience riding out the storm of the Long-Term Capital Management crisis didn’t prepare him for the financial tsunami of 2008.

Dick Fuld is a very smart man. A very experienced man in his field. But in this instance, perhaps in part due to the allure of quickly resolving the crisis, he may have relied too heavily on past solutions rather than looking at the issue with a fresh perspective.
Overreliance on past solutions—when not balanced with a steady injection of new lessons that yield new ways of doing things—can sometimes lead to career derailment (when a career, successful for many years, goes into eclipse). The leadership research on derailment\(^8\) shows a leading indicator to be the extent to which a person does or does not continuously learn—learn new things instead of adding ammunition to support what they already know. In worst-case scenarios, these people had quit learning altogether, were convinced they could do no wrong. As a result, they couldn’t make transitions to a different job or adapt quickly to the unfamiliar. They relied on what had gotten them to where they were, ironically becoming victimized by their past successes.\(^8\) Faced with new demands, they got stuck, underestimated the newness of the demands and, instead, assumed the new demands were just another version of what they’d done before.\(^9\)

The same research that delved into career derailment also explored the characteristics that relate to career success.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Those with Successful Careers</th>
<th>Those Whose Careers Stall or Derail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have roughly twice the variety (but sometimes the same number) of on-the-job challenges</td>
<td>Tend to have the same types of assignments but virtually no pattern of learning new things from them; almost seem to have quit learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek and get more feedback on how they come across to others and what they need to do to improve</td>
<td>Have low self-awareness—an imbalanced view of their strengths and weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have zigzag careers—with many firsts and some failures</td>
<td>Don’t have a clear view of what they aren’t good at, so don’t think to develop new skills...until it’s too late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respond to this newness and adversity by learning new skills and ways of thinking</td>
<td>Fail when making transitions from the known to the unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All this does not mean you should discount your experience and abandon what’s worked for you before. It also doesn’t mean you won’t continue to see success in similar situations. You should both honor your experiences and retain a healthy dose of skepticism about them. When you’re faced with a new or tough problem or issue that needs solving, pause before defaulting to what’s been the tried-and-true path for you in the past. If the solution or course of action feels comfortable—that’s a red flag. If it seems like a winner on the surface—another red flag. Remember that your favored solutions likely have a shelf life. You are bound to encounter new contexts. Different people. Unfamiliar problems. And, eventually, you will come up against a situation where your favored solutions or skills just won’t get the job done.

Another way to look at it: Imagine two people standing in front of you. Both have a reputation for doing well and performing. A crisis hits. One of these people is carrying a bag with about ten different strategies and approaches he or she has used in the past. The other person carries a bag with a thousand different strategies and approaches to draw upon. Which person would you follow?

Being an agile learner, or possessing a high degree of what is known as Learning Agility, helps you add those strategies and approaches to your own arsenal. Why? Because agile learners embrace new challenges, look at tough problems from broad angles, and readily change to meet shifting demands. Most of all, agile learners—those with high Learning Agility—reflect. They wrest meaning from experience and turn that meaning into principles or rules of thumb they can use going forward.
What Is Learning Agility?

Learning Agility is defined as the willingness and ability to learn from experience, and subsequently apply that learning to perform successfully under new or first-time conditions. Its roots are in leadership research as opposed to educational psychology.

This definition of Learning Agility is not meant to imply that if you’re not highly learning agile, you’re incapable of learning. Everybody can learn. One of the greatest differentiators of the human condition is the ability to learn. When talking about agile learning or being learning agile, it is a particular type of learning that is different from the kind of learning that helps with things like memory, analysis, and comprehending new information. This kind of learning can be termed traditional learning.

It’s important not to think of these types of learning in terms of either/or. Everyone has a measure of both traditional and agile learning attributes to varying degrees. What is helpful here is to start to distinguish between the two.
**Traditional Learning**

- Intelligence, IQ
- Grades or academic marks, grade point average, class rank
- Scores on standardized tests that are used for post-secondary education admissions
- Functional/technical skills
  - Verbal skills
  - Data crunching/analytical skills
- Straightforward problem solving

**Agile Learning**

- Quick thinkers
- Take initiative
- Curious—always asking “why” and “how”
- Make fresh connections
- Acquire and use rules and principles
- Broad thinkers
- Know personal strengths and weaknesses
As you can see, Learning Agility is more than intelligence or simply being book smart.\textsuperscript{11,12} Learning new job and technical knowledge is different from learning new personal behaviors or ways of viewing events and problems. Street smarts, common sense, or simply learning from life experience is different from how intelligent you are (as measured by IQ tests, grades in school, or accumulating technical knowledge).\textsuperscript{12}

Both traditional and agile learning are important—both are needed for success. However, much of what is often praised today,\textsuperscript{13} especially in the work world, falls in the traditional learning category. And too much emphasis on traditional learning can be risky.

Several years ago, a large employer of accountants in the U.S. held regular recruiting programs at top-rated university campuses. They recruited about 400 bright, seemingly well-qualified accountants each year. When they conducted a periodic audit of their process, they were surprised to find about a 50% attrition, or turnover, rate from their campus recruits.

This was an expensive proposition for them, so they did a study: were there flaws in their recruiting process that caused such high attrition? It turned out they were hiring solely based on traditional learning criteria—things like grade point average, test scores, academic awards. And with the complex and changing landscape of work in the company, this simply wasn’t enough.
So they changed it up a little. Instead of just looking at grades and test scores, they started asking questions to gauge curiosity and an interest in learning a lot of new things. Agile learning characteristics. For example, the recruiters found that the amount and variety of extracurricular activities candidates engaged in was one measuring stick to tease this out. And they stopped automatically passing over the candidates who didn’t necessarily have the best grades, since a unifocus on class work isn’t a typical trait of agile learners.

The result? A significantly higher two-year success rate for the recruited candidates after implementing the new, expanded criteria.

Having high Learning Agility especially comes into play with transitions—from the known to the unknown. When you face a novel, unfamiliar situation, your existing routines and behaviors may be inadequate. Learning Agility gives you the flexibility to learn new ways of coping with unforeseen problems and opportunities. Those who are highly learning agile gain their lessons closer to the event or interaction itself. Not because they are smarter (from an IQ sense), but because they have amassed more learnings from past experiences which helps them figure out what to do when they don’t know what to do.
Learning Agility is not binary—where you’ve either got it or you don’t. Like height and weight, it is normally distributed across the general population. So everyone has learning agile tendencies to a certain extent. For the sake of illustrating what Learning Agility looks like, the focus of the descriptions will be on the characteristics of the highly learning agile.

**Knowing It When You See It**

So at this point you may be wondering, “How do I know if I have high Learning Agility? How do I spot it in others?” The good news is that Learning Agility is a composition of behaviors or competencies. Since Learning Agility is behavior-based, you can observe it in others and begin to recognize the characteristics in yourself. And, importantly, because Learning Agility is a set of behaviors, it can be developed.16

To help bring it to life, think about agile learners as excelling in some combination of five areas, or Learning Agility factors.17

Throughout the book, we will explore these Learning Agility factors in greater detail and offer strategies to hone your skills in each area.
Learning Agility Factors

Self-Awareness
They know what they’re good at and not so good at and actively address the not so good

Mental Agility
They are critical thinkers who are comfortable with complexity, examine problems carefully, and make fresh connections that they make understandable to others

People Agility
They understand the value of getting things done through others and are exceptional communicators who see conflict as an opportunity rather than a problem

Change Agility
They like to experiment and can deal with the discomfort of change; they have a passion for ideas and are highly interested in continuous improvement

Results Agility
They deliver results in first-time situations through resourcefulness and having a significant presence that inspires others
Mastery or Learning Agility: Going Deep Versus Going Broad

One of the hallmarks of agile learners is their restlessness. Their curiosity and their eagerness to explore the new and to seek out different experiences keep them searching for the next challenge. It’s not surprising, then, that such characteristics run counter to sticking with any one discipline or specialty for long periods.

So not every setting, work or otherwise, is tailor-made for agile learners, nor should it be. Indeed, there are some jobs where being highly learning agile could actually be a detriment and where deep expertise and specialization is the absolute best choice.

This viewpoint would likely be shared by the 155 people on board the January 15, 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 out of New York’s LaGuardia Airport. Pilot Chesley Sullenberger, or “Sully” as he is commonly known, was able to accomplish the highly improbable—after both jet engines died when the plane collided with a flock of birds, Sully glided the jet safely into the Hudson River. All passengers and crew were rescued with little to no injuries.

How was he able to accomplish this amazing feat? At the time, Sully was a 29-year veteran pilot with US Airways. His 19,000 hours of logged flight time was almost double the threshold for achieving mastery that Malcolm Gladwell details in his book *Outliers.* Sully had served as a flight instructor and safety chairman for the Air Line Pilots Association. In addition, he had investigated aviation accidents for the Air Force and the National Transportation Safety Board and helped develop
new protocols for airline safety. People describe Sully as “the consummate pilot,” and the mayor of New York City praised Sully for a “masterful job.”

Sully’s mastery saved more than a hundred lives that day. In that moment of crisis, it wasn’t time to experiment broadly—it was time to access the narrow, deep, focused expertise he had in his field and bring it quickly to the surface.

Where Sully and others like him excel as masters at their chosen craft, agile learners, in contrast, gravitate to careers and life paths that offer variety and breadth. Their curiosity and drive for seeking new challenges lead them to become versed (though typically not deep experts) in not just one or more related disciplines, but in multiple, sometimes very diverse, areas.

Here are some characteristics of people with a high mastery orientation. See how these characteristics compare to those of people with a Learning Agility orientation. Remember that it’s likely you will have a mix of both characteristics. Where might you best fit?

Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger
High Mastery (Depth)

- Recognized functional, technical, managerial experts
- Know current job extremely well so can be counted on, especially in tough times
- Superior performers year after year*
- Work independently with little or no supervision
- Love what they do, may not aspire to broader management
- Have depth of organizational knowledge
- Excellent at developing people
- Trusted resources within the organization
- Difficult to replace in kind
- Widely recognized outside the company

High Learning Agility (Breadth)

- Easily learn new functions
- Clever problem solvers
- Think strategically
- Perform well under new, tough conditions*
- Change behavior or approach easily
- Have wide interests (highly curious)
- Deal well with ambiguity/complexity
- Promotable outside their areas, especially into general management and senior leader roles
- Like to try different approaches
- Impatient, don’t accept the status quo

*It's important to note that the one common denominator between those with a mastery orientation and those with a learning agile orientation is that both are considered consistently high performers in their given context.
You can also consider these distinctive qualities when thinking of the types of jobs or assignments each would be best suited for:

**If the job or assignment...**

- **Is new**
  - Requires fresh ideas, new ways of thinking
  - Is in a quick-changing field, area of business where future is undefined or emerging
  - Needs major fixing
  - Requires strategic thinking, strategy development
  - Is supported by strong technical help
  - Requires political savvy
  - Is change-driven
  
  ...then someone with high Learning Agility would likely be the best fit.
If the job or assignment...

Requires considerable experience in field, depth of knowledge

Is relatively stable

Requires deep understanding of the past in order to address future situations

Needs strong and decisive tactical skills

Involves major development/mentoring of others

Is relationship-driven or depends on continuity

...then someone with a mastery orientation would likely be the best fit.
There is still much to be explored and written on the topic of mastery orientation. We touch on it here briefly for two reasons: (1) to establish clear distinctions between types of high performers, and (2) to illustrate that while possessing high Learning Agility is in many cases beneficial, building a deep expertise can also be of great value.

Much of what is described here comes down to fit—fit between what your learning preferences are and what you want from your career or life experiences. Because Learning Agility can be developed, if you aspire to the kinds of jobs or the characteristics of agile learners, you can choose to focus on growing and practicing those behaviors.

**Here’s what is known for certain:**

- Learning from diverse experiences is very beneficial in most situations, especially leadership roles
- Dependence on favorite past solutions is risky
  - With jobs getting bigger all the time, the ability to figure out what to do when you don’t know what to do will be critical
- Learning Agility is an insurance policy for an uncertain future
As you approach the remaining chapters, think about which description below may apply most to you and use it as a guide to help you determine where to focus. Keep in mind that it’s not just where you see yourself today, but how that fits with what you aspire to be, especially in your career.

I see myself as an agile learner in some ways but not in other ways
Read more about the Learning Agility factors to see what fits, what doesn’t fit, and what might help you grow

I consider myself to be a very agile learner
Check your assumptions by reading through the portraits of well-known people in each of the Learning Agility factor chapters; also pay special attention to the “Be Mindful Not to Overuse...” sections

I think of myself today as more of an expert with deep, specialized skills
Read through the Learning Agility factor behaviors which may provide useful insight into the traits and characteristics of you or people you know
Learning Agility Factor

The degree to which an individual has personal insight, clearly understands their own strengths and weaknesses, is free of blind spots, and uses this knowledge to perform effectively.
Self-Awareness
"When you know better you do better."

Maya Angelou – American poet, author, civil rights activist
How Do We Begin to Know Better?

Maya Angelou. Poet, memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, performing artist, historian, filmmaker, civil rights activist. And the list goes on. Dr. Angelou’s achievements and accolades are frankly too plentiful to list here. She has played many roles in her celebrated life. But what is the common thread that defines them? What quality in Maya Angelou created this fertile ground for achievement?

While Angelou is celebrated for the diversity of her talents and successes, she is also well known for the extent to which she reflects—reflects on her life, her experiences, her stumbles, her triumphs, her strengths, and her weaknesses. Author of six autobiographies (six!), hers is a life examined, to be sure. Yet this introspection has never been without purpose. It has been inward reflection paired with the focus on moving toward something—a goal, an aspiration, a challenge—that defines Self-Awareness for Angelou and others like her.

A journal keeper from as early as the age of nine, reflection has been a constant in Angelou’s life. But she hasn’t just kept the lens turned inward. Part of the equation for knowing yourself is gauging yourself in relation to others—how you are perceived, how you are coming across, what others think of the work that you do. Maya Angelou gets this. She gets that her every word and action reflects on her. One of her more famous quotes
speaks to this: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Angelou has relied on direct and indirect feedback to help her learn more about herself in service of achieving her goals. Now an accomplished writer, Angelou’s first public foray was less than stellar. After reciting her one-act play to the Harlem Writers Guild, she faced some harsh criticism. Angelou realized that if she was going to pursue her goal of becoming a writer, she would have to learn technique and, as she put it, “surrender my ignorance.” The feedback from the Guild was a catalyst that set her on the path to achieving that goal.

Gaining personal insights for a purpose. This is the hallmark of Self-Awareness. And this is what Maya Angelou exemplifies. And it is a journey. To this day, Angelou remains realistic about her own gifts. She once was asked in an interview if she considered herself to be wise. Her response? “Well, I’m en route. I am certainly on the road.”

Why Self-Awareness Matters

“Know thyself.” Socrates’ famous quote certainly has merit but may leave you with lingering questions like “How?” “To what end?” Fortunately, Self-Awareness, as we explore it here, is all about practicality. And that by gaining understanding of your strengths and weaknesses (and we all have some of each), you can move toward your goals with eyes wide open.
The research around the benefits of Self-Awareness is pretty clear. In one study, the best predictor of a high performance appraisal was seeing yourself as others see you; the best predictor of a low appraisal was overrating your skills. Deploying yourself against life and work is greatly helped by really knowing what you’re good, average, and bad at, what you’re untested in, and what you overdo or overuse.

The risk of remaining unaware is that you accumulate blind spots—things you think you’re great at but others don’t share your view. Known weaknesses can be tackled directly if you choose. A blind spot, on the other hand, is nearly impossible to address because it’s a weakness you don’t know exists or are unwilling to admit you’re not good at it. This leads you to confidently strut into areas that should make you cautious and humble. And disaster can soon follow.

Think of building Self-Awareness as habit-forming. First comes feedback. Feedback you seek out and welcome, whether positive or negative. Then comes internal reflection—making sense of the feedback and distilling it down to rules of thumb you can use going forward. Armed with this new insight, you can begin to bridge the gap between where you are today and what you aspire to, what your goal is. This cycle of gauging perceptions, reflecting inwardly, and then rechanneling can become self-perpetuating. And when it does, you’re likely to find that more roads to continue the journey will open up before you.
If you are on the higher end of the Self-Awareness continuum

You are likely to...

Know what you’re good at and not so good at

Seldom be surprised by others’ feedback

Willingly admit and take accountability for mistakes

View criticism as helpful

Know what causes your feelings and moods

Be candid about your strengths and weaknesses

Solicit and welcome feedback

Gain insights from missteps
And you may say things like...

"I’ve been reflecting on how I might have handled that situation differently..."

"I’d love to get your perspective on how I came across in that meeting..."

"This continues to be a problem area for me. If I’m going to reach my goal, I need to keep working on..."
When was the last time...

...you took on a job, assignment, or project where the scope, expectations, and needed skills were crystal clear from the outset? Where you knew everything you needed to know to be successful? Where there were no gaps, no uncertainties?

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VICTORIA V. SWISHER

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"I can’t think of a more timely book to offer the corporate world a beacon of hope amidst unsettling economic times. Becoming an Agile Leader provides a profoundly insightful and practical guide for recognizing and developing future distinctive leadership talent."

— Ronny Vansteenkiste, SVP, Group Head Talent Management and Organization Development, Willis Group Holdings

"A practical and compelling guide to achieving great results in new and different situations—equally useful for people leaders and team members alike. A fantastic resource!"

— Heather Barfield, VPTalent, Engagement & Mobility – Aviva North America

"Learning Agility has been a key element to step change how we talk about our talent. Equally important, Learning Agility has allowed us to focus on what matters most when it comes to development and better matching talent to specific opportunities—be it new roles, projects, etc.”

— Sandra Makino, SVP Talent Management and Organization Effectiveness, Kraft Foods

"The combination of content—between interesting examples of people who made a difference to the world and well-documented leadership research—makes this book an ideal inspiration and toolkit for anyone who wants to improve and sustain performance of either themselves, employees, teams, or organizations.”

— Mogens Raun, SVP, Head of Talent Development, Allianz SE

“Become an Agile Leader... when you don’t know what to do.

VICTORIA V. SWISHER

"This book is a gem... inspiring, instructive, and actionable.”

— Dave Ulrich, best-selling author of The Why of Work

When was the last time...