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Selecting Learning Agility and Leadership Context: An Initial Survey Development Phase

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In our modern Internet age, the rate of information is steadily increasing accompanied by increasing rates of access. There is a need to process huge volumes of information, quickly and appropriate for specific goals. Educational institutions have the opportunity to lead many in developing the skills for acquiring and applying relevant information under such rapidly changing conditions. Accordingly, educators, administrators and students might benefit from an assessment of their learning agility and leadership style. Discussion for selecting a context set for learning agility precedes discussion for leadership styles. A brief analysis of how the context might be used for a second phase for the construction of an assessment has been included in the discussion section.

Context for Learning Agility Factors

One step in developing a framework for a leadership and learning agility survey is to review the literature and construct a context set consisting of revised or perhaps merged definitions. Examples from the discussions of Clark and Gottfredson (2008), De Meuse, Dai, Eichinger, Page, Clark, and Zewdie (2011), Smith and Ragan (2005), Gagne, 1985), Bichelmeyer, Marken, Harris, Misanchuk, & Hixon (2009), and Beane (1990) will be considered, but not from a highly detailed critique of each reference. Rather, highlights of major factors are presented.

For the first example, three areas have been identified from what appears to be an overall framework of Clark and Gottfredson's (2008) model:

- 1) A basic definition of learning agility; where, Clark and Gottfredson (2008) stated: "Learning agility refers to an organization's ability to respond to adaptive challenge-be it an opportunity, threat, or crisis-through the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills" (p. 4).
- 2) Identification of five factors from Clark and Gottfredson's (2008) research determined as having "... a critical impact on the promotion or hindrance of organizational learning agility across the broad spectrum:
 - Environmental Context-market conditions, attractiveness, and opportunities for sustained profitability based on competitive position as well as the relative stability of the structure of the industry. It also includes the broader external landscape, including patterns, trends, shocks, and dislocations (p. 5).
 - Learning Mindset-the prevailing assumptions about how people learn, their dispositions

towards learning, and what their learning habits and role ought to be based on conventional thought and also immediate market forces within an industry. It is the paradigm of the period and yet also the willingness to challenge that paradigm (p. 5).

- Leadership Behavior-the dominant themes and patterns of leadership during a particular time period (p. 5).
- Learning Technology-the common and emerging forms of technology that most organizations are using to enable learning during a particular time period (p. 5).
- Organizational Support-processes, systems, structures, and other forms of support that organizations provide to help employees in their coordinated learning and execution activities” (p. 5).

3) Three chronologically based stages; where, Clark and Gottfredson (2008) stated: “In the following sections, we will trace the pursuit of learning agility using a three-staged chronology as the context for discussing how organizations have, are, and will continue to address the five factors.

- The first stage of development, Learning Agility 1.0, refers to the initial stage of learning agility that stretches from 1957 to 1981.
- Learning Agility 2.0, the second stage of development, runs from 1981 to 2004.
- The third stage of development, Learning Agility 3.0-the stage in which we now find ourselves-spand from 2004 to the present” (p. 7).

Clark and Gottfredson’s (2008) timeline selection was influenced – not exclusively – by technological advances spanning the learning stages mentioned above; where, this conclusion may be viewed in context of their statement:

Clearly the advance of learning agility cannot be defined simply by the linear advance of technology. Technology is but one of the five factors. Its impact can be severely limited by the other four. Nevertheless, certain technology developments represent inflection points along the path of development. Each of the inflection points that we discuss marks the beginning of a gradual shift in the five factors driving organizational agility (p. 7).

The depth of the context from the five factors mentioned above may be placed outside of a time continuum along with additional descriptions of learning agility to consider for inclusion in developing a survey framework.

For the second example, consider the context of De Meuse et al. (2011) where they presented the following:

- Mental Agility – The extent to which an individual is comfortable with complexity, examines problems carefully, is inquisitive, and can make fresh connections between different concepts.
- People Agility – The degree to which one is open-minded toward others, interpersonally skilled, and can deal readily with a diversity of people and difficult situations.
- Change Agility – The extent to which an individual is comfortable with change, interested in

continuous improvement, and in leading change efforts.

- Results Agility – The degree to which an individual can deliver results in first-time and/or tough situations through sheer personal drive and by inspiring teams.
- Self-Awareness – ... the depth to which an individual knows him or herself, recognizing skills, strengths, weaknesses, blind spots, and hidden strengths (p. 7).

One of De Meuse et al.'s (2011) comments seemed particularly noteworthy: "After reviewing the literature on leadership and the development of high potentials, it became evident that self-awareness was a significant component of learning agility that should stand alone" (p. 7).

So, for a third, general example of learning agility context, an area well known and discussed by many researchers in education related to learning domains and learning objectives seems appropriate for inclusion in constructing a context framework. To that end, a taxonomy discussed by Smith and Ragan (2005) in reference to Gagné (1985) has also been included for consideration:

R. Gagné (1985) divided possible learning outcomes into five large categories of "domains": verbal information (or declarative knowledge), intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, attitudes, and psychomotor skills. Most learning objectives can be classified into these categories.

In view of De Meuse et al.'s (2011) choice to include a *stand alone* component for self-awareness, additional context addressing Gagné's (1985) work may be needed. In support of the importance of the affective and cognitive learning domains, we have Bichelmeyer et al.'s (2009, p. 256) observations and reference:

Despite these concerns [teaching responsibilities in the affective domain], recent research showing emotions and cognition are inextricably linked means we can no longer argue about whether or not teachers have a responsibility to address the emotional development of their charges. Noting the simultaneity of affect and cognition, Beane (1990) states that "education *must* be affective and cannot be otherwise, just as it must be cognitive and cannot be noncognitive (p. 10)." Beane argues that "a theory of learning or schooling that ignores or denies affect is incomplete and inhuman (p. 7)."

A separate context factor addressing the affective learning domain seems justifiable for inclusion in a learning agility context framework.

Summary

There are five learning agility context factors from Clark and Gottfredsen (2008): *environmental context, learning mindset, leadership behavior, learning technology, and organizational support*. There are five learning agility context factors from De Meuse et al. (2011): *mental agility, people agility, change agility, results agility, and self-awareness*. And there are the learning domains mentioned by Smith and Ragan (2005) in reference to Gagné (1985), Bichelmeyer et al. (2009), and Beane (1990). The context for the *leadership behavior* factor from Clark and Gottfredsen (2008) might be excluded here since the context for leadership style factors has been constructed below that may be sufficient for addressing that area.

Context for Leadership Style Factors

A second step in developing in developing the framework for a leadership and learning agility survey is to select the context and/or define a set of leadership style factors. Consider the following examples from the discussions of Johannsen (2011) and Flood, Hannan, Smith, Turner, West and Dawson (2000).

For the first example, Johannsen (2011) discussed several leadership styles and attributes on a website having links across several pages containing additional discussion for specific items. Following is a list of some of the leadership styles and attributes discussed by Johannsen (2011); some of the references below have been selected from across the website's linked pages:

- Autocratic – “Autocratic personalities seek to dominate. ... In some cases, autocratic leadership tends to be linked to the authoritarian personality structure” (Johannsen, 2011, <http://www.legacee.com/Info/Meetings/AutocraticLeadership.html>, *Understanding the Autocratic Style*, para. 1).
- Laissez Faire – “The style is largely a ‘hands off’ view that tends to minimize the amount of direction and face time required.”
- Participative – “The participative style presents a happy medium between over controlling (micromanaging) and not being engaged ...”
- Transactional – “It’s considered to be ‘by the book’ approach in which the person works within the rules. As such, it’s commonly seen in large, bureaucratic organizations.”
- Transformational – “Transformational leadership is about implementing new ideas; these individuals continually change themselves; they stay flexible and adaptable; and continually improve those around them” (Johannsen, 2011, <http://www.legacee.com/Info/Leadership/LeaderResources.html>, *The Transformational Leadership Style*, para. 1).

Johannsen (2011) did discuss other leadership styles; but, the abbreviated list above has been selected for comparison with Flood, Hannan, Smith, Turner, West and Dawson’s (2000) research.

For the second example, Flood et al. (2000) identified four leadership styles in their research of *leadership style, consensus decision making and top management team effectiveness*; where, they stated:

It [their study] focuses on what effective leaders do rather than the individual traits they possess and distinguishes between four styles of leadership: authoritarian (characterized by the use of instruction and non-contingent reprimand), transactional (influence via exchange of valued rewards for services/behaviours), transformational (inspiring followers to do more than originally expected), and laissez faire (avoiding decision making and supervisory responsibility) (p. 401).

Summary

The following paraphrased, merged or extended descriptions of leadership styles from Johannsen’s (2011) and (Flood et al., 2000) models will be considered as the context for inclusion in this survey’s leadership styles framework:

- Autocratic/Authoritarian – characterized by controlling information through an available power structure in order to dominate the outcomes of managerial decisions.
- Bureaucratic/Transactional – a leadership style in which decisions conform to specific standards or when an exchange of rewards/punishments for services/behaviors is present and used.
- Laissez faire – characterized by a *hands-off* approach to direct supervisory intervention.
- Mediation – characterized by efforts to balance micromanaging and disengaging.
- Transformational – characterized by evoking a sense of change requiring flexibility and adaptability for implementing new ideas.

Discussion

A significant quantity of information can be considered from the literature. But, some care should be exercised in using the descriptions *as-is* for the context of learning agility and leadership style factors since they have been taken out of their original research context. Each of the factors above has been insightfully used by the authors and might be excluded, merged, or extended for inclusion in a context framework; one may even be able to recognize that each context factor does not necessarily define functions of learning agility and leadership styles disjoint from the effects of the others. Several combinations of the context factors may be selected. But, a set is desired that will sufficiently cover the factors influencing learning agility and leadership styles without excessive cross-over or redundant definitions. The context for learning domains and learning objectives can be indirectly referenced through the other context factors where extensive references exist from the literature. For example in the context of *competency, skills, abilities* and so on, we can consider Romiszowski's (2009) observations:

Competence (or competency), in the technical sense used in recent educational and corporate human development contexts, is often defined as the cluster of skills, abilities, habits, character traits, and knowledge a person must have in order to perform a specific job well. For instance, management competency includes the traits of systems thinking and emotional intelligence, and skills in influence and negotiation. (p. 203)

So, as this study proceeds into subsequent phases and revision of the context factors is evaluated against preliminary results from survey prototypes, inclusion of specific references related to learning domains and learning objectives is expected. For now, De Meuse et al.'s (2011) choice for selecting *Self-Awareness* as a standalone category is considered here as significant, particularly in view of the importance of the affective learning domain discussed by Bichelmeyer et al. (2009). So, a separate category targeting the affective learning domain shall be considered for inclusion in the context framework for this exploratory phase. Consequently, a set of revised, merged or extended factors with definitions and indices in Table 1 has been selected for inclusion in this part of the survey's learning agility and leadership style framework.

Table 1

Selected context and indexing for learning agility and leadership style factors

Category	Context Factors
Learning Agility LA1	Learning Technology – any media, digital or otherwise, used for the purposes of academic instruction, training, or presentation of knowledge.
LA2	Mental Agility – the ability which an individual or organization recognizes the depth and complexity of problems and congruent solutions for those problems.
LA3	Organizational Support – resources that can be offered internally or externally available to the organization for the purposes of a mission.
LA4	Social Agility – the ability which permits internal or external cooperation between individuals or organizations.
LA5	Affective Agility – an individual's or the organization's ability to solve problems involving emotional issues.
Leadership Style	
LS1	Autocratic/Authoritarian – controlling information through an available power structure in order to dominate the outcomes of managerial decisions.
LS2	Bureaucratic/Transactional – a leadership style in which decisions conform to specific standards or when an exchange of rewards/punishments for services/behaviors is present and used.
LS3	Laissez faire – characterized by a <i>hands-off</i> approach to direct supervisory intervention.
LS4	Mediation – characterized by efforts to balance micromanaging and disengaging.
LS5	Transformational – characterized by evoking a sense of change requiring

With the learning agility and leadership context factors listed in Table 1, a set of survey items/questions can be developed. The second phase of this exploratory research could include the use of Likert scales; where de Vaus (2002) provided a basic statement for their use:

At its simplest level it [a Likert scale] consists of a set of Likert-style questionnaire items ... in which respondents are presented with an attitude statement and asked to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with it.

So, we might construct the following question for the variable LS2 in Table 1 to survey a response for a bureaucratic/transactional leadership style: *How frequently do you refer to the specific wording of rules and regulations specified in the policy manual for solving problems?* Respondents could be asked to rank their behavior on an increasing scale of dependence from one to five where *one* corresponds to *not at all* and *five* corresponds to *all the time*. We might also construct the following question for the variable LA5 in Table 1 to survey a response related to the affective domain: *When involved with a dispute with a coworker, how frequently does the incident appear confrontational?* Here again, respondents could be asked to rank their behavior according to the scale mentioned above. A complete set of questions is a topic for another phase in the development of the survey. But, it shall be mentioned here that after results have been organized according to descriptive statistical methods, Triola (2011, Chapter 2), revision of the context factors and questions may be necessary.

Two central problems were also mentioned by de Vaus (2002) in the context of *How to Build a Good Likert Scale* (p 124):

The two central problems when creating Likert scales are identifying

- which items legitimately 'go together';
- the best way in which to combine them.

For the context framework in this paper, Table 1 indicates that learning agility items should be separated from leadership style items; where, it seems reasonable to give each of the items equal weight to minimize statistical bias. But, determining the order in which specific items should appear in the questionnaire is a topic for discussion in the question development phase of the survey.

Conclusion

The intent of this paper was to present an initial phase for development of a self-assessment survey for comparing learning agility and leadership styles. The literature was sampled for definitions and ideas; where, an extended set of leadership agility and leadership style factors was developed. A second phase of the survey's development will include questions based on the context factors presented here; revisions may be necessary after administration of a prototype and analysis of associated descriptive statistics.

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