



Cognitive agility realized.

What is “cognitive agility”?

The new basic business skill

In general, “experts” of all kinds are able to harness the power of the basic heuristic devices we all use to interpret the world. They are very good at organizing their knowledge within a holistic framework that allows them to quickly perceive the significance of events or situations. From their point of view, they are acting from “the gut”, but in fact, a complex framework is guiding their behavior and can be identified by a systematic analysis of their performance patterns. As the individual develops greater expertise based on experience in a particular domain, his or her thinking gets increasingly “intuitive”. That is, his or her expertise is organized around a core set of organizing principles that comprise a “mental model” of the domain as opposed as a set of recipes for action.

To capture this kind of intuitive expertise among decision makers, we use the term *cognitive agility* to refer to the extent to which an individual’s thinking is flexible when data indicate the situation has changed. As such, cognitive agility represents an individual’s ability to revise their existing expertise, rooted in older ways of thinking and doing, into new frameworks to tackle novel problems. The converse is *cognitive rigidity*, where the person is impervious to new data, being dominated by a rigid framework or paradigm that acts to filter out new information that may be relevant, creating blind spots.

The cognitively agile individual is able to harness the basic abilities of intuitive experts and use that knowledge to mentally rehearse a wide variety of outcomes and strategies within a particular domain. They can almost “feel” how a situation will play out and anticipate the critical outcomes that are most effective in meeting a goal. Furthermore, they are able to rapidly revise both their behaviors and belief systems as the situation unfolds, continually meeting the demands of the larger goal while keeping in touch with the nuances of a changing environment. In this sense, the cognitively agile individual does not cling to a particular set of beliefs about how a situation should be handled. But is able to focus on what beliefs are required to satisfy the outcome.



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In the current climate of rapid change in business, enterprise level decision-makers need to continually evaluate their organization's value and competitive future. For example, the average tenure for CEO's is currently only 23 months, a trend indicative of the increasing challenges and the requirement for rapid results. And, companies increasingly rely on external hiring of senior managers, highlighting the trend toward importing talent as a means of bringing innovation to struggling companies. Furthermore, the "knowledge economy" requires new forms of innovative thinking in which enterprise level problems are often best solved by seeking new opportunities and approaches rather than simply finding ways to make existing business practices more efficient. As such, cognitive agility may be the new basic skill among enterprise level decision makers, and, despite these challenges, some individuals have proven themselves continually adept at predicting trends and steering their companies toward continued success.