

Workplace learning in times of uncertainty: exploring how leaders learn under the lens of learning agility

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Abstract

Purpose – The uncertainty of today’s business environment requires leaders to acquire new skills continuously and remain adaptable to change. This qualitative study aims to examine how leaders experience learning in the ever-changing workplace and the agile learning strategies they develop to navigate uncertainty.

Design/methodology/approach – This study builds upon the literature on learning agility and learning organization. Participants were purposively sampled from banks in several Central and Eastern European countries, Italy and Egypt. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 senior managers and used reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings – The analysis yielded an overarching theme, “learning what to do when you do not know what to do,” and two themes: “signifying learning from mistakes” and “learning a resilience capacity. The findings highlighted the complex interplay among mistake tolerance, reflective practices and resilience strategies in the daily learning experiences of leaders.

Originality/value – Although there is considerable literature on leaders’ roles in fostering a learning culture, qualitative research incorporating their perspectives is limited, particularly in rapidly changing contexts. Understanding leaders’ learning experiences is vital for rethinking workplace learning and development. This study uniquely captures a diverse range of perspectives from leaders across different roles, business functions, geographical regions and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords Learning agility, Learning organization, Leadership, Thematic analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The current post-COVID-19 business landscape is increasingly characterized by rapid change, heightened complexity and continuous exposure to uncertainty. The pandemic has accelerated transformations in digital technology, forcing organizations to reconfigure business models, adopt new working methods and reshape learning environments using virtual technologies (Bennett & McWhorter, 2022). These changes pose considerable



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challenges for leadership, positioning leaders as central figures in organizational learning (OL) processes, crisis management and sense-making (Kaiser, 2020; Reio, 2020). In this context, scholars have underscored the importance of agility and the ability to learn and adapt as essential for individual and organizational survival and growth in uncertain environments (Bennett & McWhorter, 2021; Pulakos, Kantrowitz, & Schneider, 2019). At the individual level, the concept of learning agility (LA) – commonly defined as the ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply such learning to unfamiliar or first-time situations – has garnered notable attention from both scholars and practitioners, particularly regarding its role as key competence enabling leaders to adapt effectively to novel and complex situations (De Meuse, 2017; DeRue, Ashford, & Myers, 2012). Simultaneously, in the field of organizational studies, the construct of the learning organization (LO) has gained prominence, highlighting the importance of integrating collective and systemic learning processes into an organization's structure to foster and sustain a culture of learning (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008; Watkins & Kim, 2018).

Given the crucial role of leaders in organizations, understanding how they learn during transitions is essential for advancing discussions on OL. Research has focused on how leaders facilitate learning within organizations, identifying styles and practices that foster a supportive climate (e.g. Yukl, 2009; Wallo, Lundqvist, & Coetzer, 2024), while few empirical studies have investigated how leaders engage in learning processes amidst the complexities of their daily work.

Prior studies on managerial learning (e.g. Antonacopoulou, 2006; Roan & Rooney, 2006) have primarily focused on psychosocial and relational dynamics. Antonacopoulou (2006) underscored the influence of identity needs, such as belonging and acceptance, on meaning-making processes, while Roan & Rooney (2006) emphasized the importance of professional relationships in supporting leaders' learning and managing tensions between individual and organizational expectations. However, these studies did not fully address the emotional, cognitive and experiential dimensions of learning in high uncertainty, nor the internal tensions affecting leaders' learning (Antonacopoulou, 1998). To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how leaders learn in today's work environment, specifically in the banking sector.

By integrating the concept of LA into the broader theoretical framework of LO, this research aims to deepen the understanding of the strategies, dynamics and contextual factors that influence leaders' learning mechanisms and processes within complex and uncertain work settings. In doing so, it addresses recent calls for a reexamination of dominant paradigms in workplace learning (Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer, 2014; Watkins & Marsick, 2023), particularly considering the disruptive nature of recent global events that challenge traditional assumptions about learning from experience (Stouten, Rousseau, & de Cremer, 2018). The following research questions guided our investigation:

RQ1. How do bank leaders experience learning in their daily work lives?

RQ2. What learning strategies do they develop to navigate complexity and uncertainty?

Theoretical perspectives

Learning organization

LO and OL have been central constructs in organizational studies for over 40 years (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990). Initially, used interchangeably, these terms have evolved to be connected yet distinct (Örtenblad, 2001). The LO construct refers to organizations that exhibit continuous learning and adaptability. OL, in contrast, pertains to

the collective learning activities and processes used to acquire knowledge and develop skills (Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004). Understanding and identifying characteristics and conditions necessary to build organizational capabilities to learn and change has been a constant focus in organizational literature, leading to various LO definitions and models.

Senge (1990) introduced the idea of a LO as an entity that actively promotes continuous learning at both the individual and organizational levels, emphasizing the importance of nurturing new and expansive patterns of thinking and the capacity of learning how to learn. Later, Marsick & Watkins (2003) introduced an integrative LO model that embraces a cultural perspective and identifies multiple levels of OL – individual, team and organizational – along with system areas. Authors emphasized that organizations committed to continuous learning create a culture providing ample resources and tools, encouraging individuals to engage in formal and informal learning. Furthermore, researchers have highlighted the strategic role of leaders in building and sustaining LOs by acting as facilitators and educators who actively support the growth and skills development of employees (Watkins & Kim, 2018). In addition, researchers have also pointed out that managers not only promote OL but also engage themselves in continuous learning and initiate individual change (Wallo et al., 2024).

Since the work of Argyris and Schön in 1978, researchers have examined the intricate relationship between OL and individual learning. A central point to consider is whether learning at the organizational level is merely a collection of individual and group learning experiences or if it operates independently as a vital element of the organization itself, regardless of individual learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Kim, 1993). Scholars generally agree that OL results from individual learning, emphasizing the significance of individual contributions in LOs (Örtenblad, 2004; Senge, 1990). Literature has extensively examined the mechanisms involved in knowledge creation, acquisition and transfer within organizations, often emphasizing group and collective learning practices rather than individual learning (Antonacopoulou, 2006). Nevertheless, the interplay between individual and OL remains complex and challenging (Alves & Thiebaut, 2024).

Learning agility

Over the last two decades, LA has gained recognition among scholars and practitioners as a key driver of leadership potential for talent identification and succession planning in organizations (Harvey & De Meuse, 2021). The theoretical foundation of LA is rooted in the experiential learning theory, which views learning as an essential process of human adaptation through synergistic interactions between individuals and their environment, transforming experiences into knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Research on successful leaders highlights the importance of learning from experience as a critical differentiator in navigating new and challenging situations. In contrast, derailed leaders are often characterized by their inability or unwillingness to adapt, admit mistakes, or move beyond early career skills (McCall, 1994).

Building on the positive correlation between experiential learning and career success among top executives, Lombardo & Eichinger (2000) introduced the concept of LA, defined as “the willingness and ability to learn from experience and subsequently apply that learning to perform successfully under first-time, tough, or different conditions” (p. 323). Their four-factor model of LA encompasses:

- (1) *People agility* consists of self-awareness, learning from experience, treating others constructively and resilience under change.

- (2) *Results agility* emphasizes results orientation under challenging conditions, inspiring others and demonstrating strong presence and confidence.
- (3) *Mental agility* refers to innovative problem-solving, comfort with complexity and the ability to articulate thinking.
- (4) *Change agility* involves curiosity, passion for ideas, experimentation and engagement in skill-building activities (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000, p. 324).

The original model has evolved due to the extensive applications of LA within leadership assessment processes, prompting researchers to propose new definitions and models to better capture the nuances of both *learning* and *agility*. De Meuse (2017) introduced a revised and broader conceptualization of LA, emphasizing its relevance and application in new leadership roles. In contrast, DeRue et al. (2012) advocated for a more focused definition of LA, emphasizing aspects such as learning speed and flexibility in understanding situations and transitions between ideas. Authors viewed LA as a specific component of the general learning ability, while tending to overlook its motivational and intentional dimensions. Nonetheless, Lombardo & Eichinger (2000) model remains the most frequently cited in the literature (Milani, Setti, & Argentero, 2021).

Research on LA covers various fields, including human resources, leadership and psychology. Scholars have concentrated on clarifying the concept of LA, examining its role in leadership development as key factor for career success (Dries, Vantilborgh, & Pepermans, 2012; Jooss, McDonnell, & Burbach, 2019), validating measurement scales (Bouland-van Dam, Oostrom, & Jansen, 2022; Milani, Sommovigo, Ghirotto, & Setti, 2024) and comparing LA with constructs related to employee agility, such as adaptive performance, proactivity, resilience and workforce agility (Park & Park, 2021). These studies emphasized LA's role in sustaining high performance over time by fostering an individual's motivation to learn and maintain a positive attitude toward change and uncertainty. However, a unified definition of LA remains elusive, and debates continue regarding its distinctiveness from other factors, with several limits in its theoretical advancement and practical application within leadership development and human resource development (HRD) fields (Harvey & De Meuse, 2021).

Linking learning organization and learning agility

A growing body of research has begun to explore the relationship between LA and LO, indicating that a learning-oriented culture is a crucial antecedent and contextual moderator of individual LA (e.g. DeRue et al., 2012; Reyes, Blanco, & Pinillos, 2024). These studies show that a supportive work environment promoting continuous learning directly influences employees' LA, enabling adaptation and innovation amid changes. Recent research highlights the positive effects of LA and OL culture, as a key characteristic of a LO, on various individual and organizational outcomes, including reduced turnover intention (Tripathi, Srivastava, & Sankaran, 2020) and enhanced innovative behaviors (Putri & Suharti, 2021). LA mediates the relationship between learning culture and employee engagement (Saputra, Abidinagoro, & Kuncoro, 2018). In addition, findings indicate a strong link between individual-level LA and overall organizational performance, suggesting that organizations with a learning-agile workforce achieve superior results (Tripathi & Kalia, 2022).

In summary, research supports the reciprocal and systemic relationship between LA and LO as interdependent constructs. LA represents an essential individual-level capability that enables the development and sustenance of a LO. At the same time, LO provides the structural and cultural conditions necessary for the development and institutionalization of LA. Although these studies have begun to examine the relationship between LA and LO, this

body of research remains relatively limited and predominantly quantitative. The interdependence and interactions between individual LA and OL culture remain largely unexplored; notably, there is a gap in qualitative studies investigating how leaders personally experience and make sense of learning within the context of their organizations.

To conclude, in our study, the LO literature provided the ground for rethinking individual learning of leaders within the complexities of contemporary workplaces (Marsick, Watkins, & Lundgren, 2024). The concept of LA enabled a focus on the personal perspective of leaders through the lens of the experiential learning model.

Methods

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative design, signifying a flexible approach to gaining insights into a phenomenon that is not fully understood. The term exploratory indicates that the research does not start with fixed hypotheses or a predetermined framework. Instead, it generates understanding inductively by focusing on participants' experiences and perspectives. We focus on how leaders subjectively experience and interpret learning as it occurs in their everyday professional contexts. This design aligns with interpretivist epistemologies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), embracing a social constructivist perspective which emphasizes that meaning is co-constructed through the dynamic interaction between researchers and participants during the research process.

Setting and participants

This study is part of a broader project examining LA-related individual differences involving 12 banking companies: ten based in Central and Eastern European countries, one in Italy, and one in Egypt. The complexity of the banking sector and ongoing transformations driven by digitalization and compliance pressures make it an ideal setting for exploring how leaders learn and adapt in the face of uncertainty and transformative changes (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Recent research indicates a decline in traditional banking business models and roles, alongside the emergence of new jobs and skills. This shift emphasizes the vital role of leaders in fostering learning and addressing these challenges to support organizational transformation, as well as employees' reskilling and adaptation (McKinsey & Company, 2017; Trenerry et al., 2021). Furthermore, selected countries are facing challenges due to international mergers and acquisitions, which have accelerated local adoption of innovation and digitalization processes (Fidrmuc & Kapounek, 2020). Including leaders from diverse geographical areas enriched our study with a cross-cultural perspective on how environmental factors influence individual learning mechanisms.

To identify individuals who could offer rich, detailed understandings of the phenomenon under investigation, we used a purposive sampling strategy, intentionally selecting participants based on their relevance, experience and potential to illuminate key aspects of the research topic (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This approach facilitated the identification of individuals with substantial leadership expertise within the banking sector across Central and Eastern European countries, Italy and Egypt. Participants were invited after securing company consent. Inclusion participants needed to hold senior leadership positions, such as "director" or "general manager," with at least two years of experience at their current company. Fluency in English was required because the interviews were conducted in that language. Fluency in English was a prerequisite for participation, given the interviews' language. Diversity in gender, country and business function was also ensured to enrich the study perspectives.

Data collection

We developed an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide based on [Lombardo & Eichinger \(2000\)](#) original four-facet LA conceptualization. The guide (see Supplementary Table SI) explored participants' daily learning experiences across various work environments, focusing on their perceptions and adaptation methods in ever-changing conditions. The semi-structured format allowed for personalized and flexible discussions, making participants feel at ease and enabling iterative refinement of the interview schedule based on ongoing data analysis.

RM conducted all interviews. RM is a researcher and psychologist specializing in leadership development and adult learning; LG is an experienced qualitative researcher and methodologist; IS is an established work and organizational psychology researcher. None of the participants were known to RM, LG and IS. Field notes were recorded after each interview, and a reflexive diary was maintained to enhance self-awareness. All interviews were recorded, and the data, including notes, audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored in a locked filing cabinet and on password-protected computers.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative interviews, providing a detailed understanding of participants' perspectives and developing a narrative account ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). The reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by [Braun & Clarke \(2022\)](#), further recognizes the importance of researcher subjectivity in shaping and co-creating meaning.

The analysis involved six recursive phases: familiarization with the data, systematic coding, generation of initial themes, development and review of candidate themes, refinement and definition of final themes and report production ([Braun et al., 2019](#)). Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were used, and NVivo software facilitated the analytical process. Semantic (explicit) and latent (hidden) themes were identified. RM and LG initially immersed themselves in the data by reading through the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings. Each transcript was actively read multiple times by searching for patterns and meanings and noting these ideas. In phase two, they independently coded the data inductively, generating a diverse range of regularly reviewed and discussed codes. The third stage was identifying themes, which involved examining codes and associating data, and clustering these into meaningful patterns. These themes were meticulously reviewed for quality and relevance to the data set and research questions, resulting in an initial thematic list. In the fifth phase, relevant patterns and central themes were identified. RM and LG defined these themes and created a thematic map illustrating the relationships between themes and subthemes. Finally, quotations were selected and included in the final report, which the team reviewed and discussed.

Reflexivity and quality of the analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis facilitated the progression from raw data to final themes. Data accuracy was ensured through transcript verification with original audio files and constant member checking. Researcher triangulation was achieved through independent coding by RM and LG, followed by collaborative discussions to reconcile interpretations and challenge individual assumptions. Regular team meetings were crucial for fostering critical engagement, openly discussing and mitigating potential biases, considering diverse perspectives and iteratively refining the interview protocol. All authors collectively discussed and agreed upon the coding and the thematic generation, ensuring logical and accurate analysis. RM's professional experience in similar organizational contexts, while facilitating

access to the field and participants, was continually acknowledged as a potential source of bias. This was directly addressed through constant critical reflection and collaboration with LG, who ensured assumptions and interpretations remained unbiased and robust.

Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the companies involved in the research. Eligible managers were formally invited to participate in the study through a letter reporting background, objectives and procedures. Their participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent. In addition, participants were assured of the confidentiality of interview data.

Results

Thirty managers were initially invited to participate: one declined due to unavailability, resulting in 29 participants. The target for participant numbers was guided by established indications for sample sizes used in thematic analysis (Morse, 1995) and the need to generate sufficient rich material for analysis to identify patterns within the data (Terry, Hayfield, & Braun, 2017). The study encompassed senior executives from 11 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Italy and Egypt, representing diverse functions such as business directors, human resources directors, chief financial officers, heads of risk management and directors of credit. The participants' characteristics are detailed in Table 1. Individual interviews were

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Characteristics	Number (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Women	7 (24)
Men	22 (76)
<i>Age (years) mean</i>	
47 (range 40–56)	
<i>Education</i>	
Bachelor or equivalent	16 (55)
Master	12 (41)
PhD	1 (3)
<i>Role</i>	
Business director (corporate/SME/retail)	12 (41)
Director of credit	1 (3)
HR & organization director	6 (21)
Governance function	1 (3)
Head of risk management	4 (14)
Chief financial officer	5 (17)
<i>Work location</i>	
Centre-Eastern Europe countries*	23 (79)
Italy	4 (14)
Egypt	2 (7)
<i>Other characteristics</i>	
Previous experience in international job assignment	13 (45)
Expatriate managers (overseas)	8 (28)

Note(s): *Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Ukraine

conducted based on the participants' preferences, primarily online, from December 2021 to April 2022, lasting 60–75 min.

We identified an overarching theme, “Learning what to do when you don’t know what to do,” reflecting participants’ perspectives on learning during change. This overarching theme encompasses two key themes: “signifying learning from mistakes,” exploring how leaders derived meaning from mistakes in dynamic environments and “learning a resilience capacity,” focusing on strategies to enhance resilience (see Figure 1 for illustration and Supplementary Table S2).

Overarching theme – “learning what to do when you don’t know what to do”

Participants described the essence of learning during change as “learning what to do when we do not know what to do.” This overarching theme captures how dealing with uncertainty and the discomfort of the unknown, amplified by the pandemic’s disruption, are fundamental aspects of leaders’ learning experiences in ever-changing work environments:

The past couple of years have been a real example of a radically unexpected context that requires of deciding when you do not know what to do. Therefore, it is key to learn what to do when we do not know what to do because we have never experienced it before. We need to train ourselves (Manager 29-Man)

Participants recognized their lack of preparedness for the unexpected, which motivated them to learn new approaches to coping with uncertainty and making effective decisions despite ambiguity. They viewed change as a constant, referring to it as “the new normal” in their professional environment. Unlike in the past, when disruptions were sporadic, the current workplace is characterized by continuous changes, with crises and disruptions now seen as unavoidable.

Although many managers perceived these changes as integral to the natural course of evolution, often offering novel opportunities and perspectives, they underscored the substantial personal effort required to navigate these changes and the need to develop the capacity to accept them, fostering a greater tolerance for uncertainty.

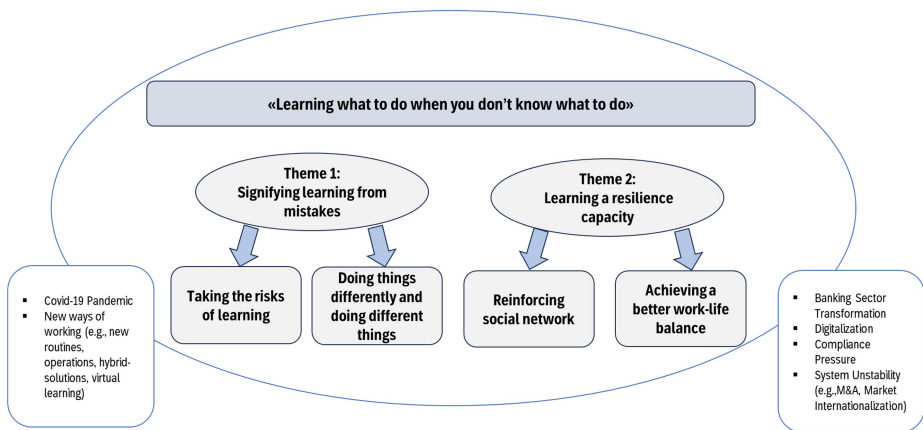


Figure 1. Thematic map of the overarching theme, themes and subthemes
Source: Authors’ own work

Theme 1 – signifying learning from mistakes in uncertain times

In their fast-changing and unpredictable environment, leaders stressed the importance of learning from errors and failures as crucial for both personal growth and career progress. They recognized that failures are inevitable and commonly occur in both personal and professional settings. Participants shared various types of failures, including unsuccessful product launches, project delays, conflicts and career setbacks. Despite these challenges, they emphasized the valuable lessons gained from these experiences, viewing failures as opportunities for reflection and development rather than threats. One participant expressed this idea perspective:

For me, it is unreasonable not to have experience of failure [...]. However, the key is the lesson learned and what you take home. Experiences are always an invitation to reflect. Setbacks are expected; this is life[...] but I do not see them as failures. (Manager 07-Man)

Furthermore, most managers described reflection as an intentional process that aided in comprehending the events of a specific situation and rationalizing why they occurred, thereby mitigating the likelihood of similar replications in the future. Reflection was also crucial in effectively managing the discomfort that follows mistakes. One manager mentioned:

To be honest, I do not like mistakes, and I am not very good at handling mistakes; I mean my own mistakes and the mistakes of others. Nevertheless, I have learned that it is important to become conscious of the causes: what I neglected this time, to fix the problem, and not repeat it (Manager 16-Man).

In addition, managers recognized the emotional aspect of learning from failures when they reflected on challenging moments in their careers. They highlighted the need to recover from setbacks and to continue persevering despite obstacles that may arise. Embracing mistakes also aided leaders in shaping a personalized approach to their career journey and redefining unrealistic expectations of a linear progression:

From that story, I have learned that you can start again and learn new things from every mistake. Now, I have a broader horizon than I did three years ago. I have learned this from a very tough experience. (Manager 27-Man)

Sub-theme: Taking the risks of learning

Participants highlighted the inherent risks they experienced while learning from their mistakes. They articulated this concept of risk in two distinct ways. First, they expressed risk as the potential for errors. Leaders disclosed their daily challenges in accepting the inevitability of mistakes, despite their meticulous checking procedures. They emphasized the significance of adopting a perspective that recognizes errors as an unavoidable compromise in the pursuit of solutions and progress, especially when facing new and unforeseen issues. As expressed by one manager:

In my division, there are two rules: one is that you can make mistakes, and the second is that there are three types of answers: yes, no, and I do not know. If you add, 'I will check,' I enjoyed it. Mistakes can be acceptable parts of the solution. (Manager 17-Man)

The second way managers signified risk was concerning their experience of handling failures within their leadership roles. Some participants emphasized that, in their managerial position, they felt heightened pressure to embrace the risks associated with making mistakes and to openly communicate this understanding with their teams:

We know anyone can make a mistake, but to be honest, accepting this risk for me[...] You know, this is another story (Manager 17-Man)

I admit my mistakes to my team because the worst mistake I can make is to deny, not to accept that I can make mistakes (Manager 05-Man).

Furthermore, managers recognized the critical importance of assuming the risk and responsibility inherent in fostering a culture that transitions from attributing blame for errors and failures to promoting a more constructive and supportive approach. This perspective was exemplified by a manager who recounted:

We created the so-called “ball of shame.” I put the ball on my desk to remind me of my mistakes and to prompt all my team members that we can make mistakes (...). I am also trying to change the approach to mistakes in my team. It is quite easy to say: I made a mistake, but it is crucial to support your team in accepting their errors (Manager 05-Man).

Many participants stressed the importance of consistently demonstrating individual commitment to fostering a constructive approach toward mistakes; this requires overcoming both personal reluctance and organizational barriers that hinder the open sharing and discussion of insights derived from failures.

Sub-theme – Doing things differently, doing different things

The participants highlighted the pivotal role that learning from mistakes plays in fostering a more flexible approach to problem-solving, which is characterized by experimentation and iterative trial and error. A manager expressed: “Having experience of failure is common. I mean, more often we must deal with things and situations where we would have done things differently”. (manager 07-Man).

Leaders also recognized that an awareness of their past errors and the potential for future mistakes encouraged them to explore alternative strategies and approaches, particularly when confronting new business challenges and unpredictable circumstances.

Furthermore, managers highlighted how embracing mistakes often led to unexpected outcomes and new ideas, promoting innovation by inviting team members to explore new approaches. Reflecting on errors and taking responsibility for them also enhanced self-awareness and initiated a transformative shift in mindset. One manager expressed this sentiment by saying:

When faced with frustration after a mistake, your learning curve increases because in these moments, you are forced to be honest with yourself, and you start to find alternative ways of doing things. You discuss the issues with your team, encouraging them to advance new ideas and do things differently (Manager 01-Woman).

Theme 2- Learning a resilience capacity

Managers observed that their daily exposure to continuous and unexpected changes significantly affected their work experiences. Everyday stressors, such as uncertainty, pervasive technology and time constraints, led to a persistent sense of pressure. This stress often resulted in decreased energy, motivation, exhaustion and frustration. Some managers struggled with the perception of losing control due to unexpected events, as illustrated by one who described the challenges of “remote working”:

The main stress factor is this new way of working, remote working. There are no barriers or boundaries; you constantly receive requests at all hours, and I work 24/7. I like my job, but I feel like I am developing a mobile addiction. (Manager 18-Man)

Leaders recognized the importance of learning resilience to overcome adverse and stressful situations; nevertheless, they acknowledged personal difficulties in finding practical solutions and prioritizing self-care and individual needs. One manager stated:

This is my problem because I tend to control everything, which is a more personal and human problem. Stress concerning deadlines is considerable; I have been trying to maintain a distance over these last few years. It is essential to keep this distance, this objectivity, as otherwise, I would have to take three pills instead of one for the blood pressure. (Manager 17-Man)

Moreover, most participants observed reluctance to change working routines and personal leading approaches as the main obstacles to purposely implementing different behaviors to address recurrent setbacks. One manager shared:

When I feel overwhelmed, I try doing things differently. For example, I have decided not to reply to emails during the weekend. In the past, I worked on some aspects of my behavior, such as better managing people, delegating some things, and being better able to plan and organize my activities [...] to be honest, it is not easy to change. (Manager 02-Man)

Sub-theme: Reinforcing social networking:

Participants highlighted the importance of collaborating with team members and exchanging views and ideas with peers to reduce insecurity and isolation in uncertain situations. Furthermore, managers underscored the need to invest personal effort and dedication in creating space for discussion and dialogue with colleagues. One manager stated: "What allows me to face these difficult moments is the proximity, feeling of closeness to others ([...]) Knowing that I am not alone in a problem and that I can ask for help and offer help to others." (Manager 09-Woman)

Some managers mentioned that relying on their team and promoting collaboration and dialogue helped them overcome adversity, leading to better decision-making through a positive cycle of reciprocity:

During complex and challenging moments[...] I rely on my people to reduce my stress. They have knowledge and experience, and I use my empathy to involve them in decisions, encouraging them to be proactive and find solutions together. (Manager 24-Woman)

Sub-theme: Achieving a better work-life balance.

The participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance between work and private life for their engagement at work and overall well-being. One participant stated:

My primary goal is to find an adequate equilibrium between my work and my private life[...] I believe that if you do not have this balance, it is tough to find energy and motivation every day. (Manager 06-Woman)

Leaders, regardless of gender or nationality, highlighted the importance of balancing work and personal life, which encompasses relationships with family and friends, leisure activities and hobbies. These aspects are essential for managing stress and achieving fulfillment in everyday life. The narratives shared by participants emphasized how family connections offer stability and a valuable sense of understanding. One manager articulated this by stating:

My relationship with my partner is the central axis around which I structure my life. My professional life revolves around what is most vital to me: my family, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. My spouse could also provide me with the 'right' perspective to handle leadership challenges. (Manager 17-Man)

Moreover, the participants emphasized how maintaining a work-life balance influences their career decisions, particularly when considering international job opportunities while also preserving family ties. This aspect was particularly important for managers who had previously lived abroad, as the needs of their family played a crucial role in their acceptance of job offers.

Taking care of personal well-being was a fundamental theme in the leaders' accounts about their strategies for harmonizing work and personal life. They specifically underscored

activities like sports, mindfulness techniques and engaging hobbies as essential avenues for rejuvenation and relaxation.

Discussion

This study has explored how bank leaders experience learning in their daily work lives and the learning strategies they develop to navigate complexity and uncertainty. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature that reevaluates the mechanisms and structures facilitating individual learning and meaning-making in today's unpredictable workplaces. Leaders described their learning journey during uncertain times as "learning what to do when you do not know what to do," highlighting the relevance of learning from mistakes and developing resilience strategies to overcome setbacks and enhance personal well-being. Our findings reveal that facing discomfort and vulnerability in unstable situations heightens leaders' need to experiment and adopt novel approaches and solutions in their daily work environments. These results align with research on emerging paradigms in LO (e.g. [Antonacopoulou, Moldjord, Steiro, & Stokkeland, 2019](#); [Watkins & Marsick, 2023](#)), which question traditional assumptions about learning from past experiences, given the increasing complexity and speed in contemporary organizations. Our findings support research showing individual learning is an ongoing process that fosters the development of new connections at cognitive and social levels, thereby creating fresh opportunities and improving adaptability to continual changes ([Antonacopoulou, 2014](#)).

We explored leaders' perceptions of learning from mistakes in workplaces. Our findings suggest that embracing risks associated with learning and experimentation is complex and often conflicting for leaders. Participants acknowledged the importance of confronting mistakes but noted that personal resistance and a blame-oriented corporate culture significantly shape their reactions to failure. This discord reveals the contextual and cultural dimensions influencing managers' perceptions and reactions to mistakes, echoing prior research on social and technical barriers associated with error management and the need for cultivating a psychologically safe climate to encourage experimentation ([Cannon & Edmondson, 2005](#); [Wang et al., 2018](#)). Notably, while senior leadership is theoretically positioned to influence organizational responses to failure ([Weinzimmer & Esken, 2017](#)), participants shared a contradiction between formal encouragement to learn from mistakes and informal practices that stigmatize errors. This aligns with studies showing these discrepancies often persist in organizations prioritizing knowledge over learning ([Kucharska & Rebelo, 2022](#)). This phenomenon has been attributed to cognitive biases that lead individuals, particularly leaders and managers, to perceive the acceptance of errors and learning from mistakes as potentially detrimental to their professional status and competence reputation ([Dimitrova & van Hooft, 2021](#)). This study enhances the understanding of agile learning processes in LA literature by highlighting their social, contextual and cultural dimensions. Reflecting on and learning from mistakes in organizations requires individual openness and positivity, along with a cultural environment that values failure and open discussion as sources of insight and innovation ([Edmondson, 2004](#); [Senge, 1990](#)).

This study emphasizes that reflective practice is essential to participants' learning experiences, consistent with established organizational research ([Kolb, 2015](#)). Initially, individual reflective practice involves contemplating past experiences, reconsidering potential errors or shortcomings and taking steps to prevent their recurrence and enhance future outcomes ([Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009](#); [Anseel, 2017](#); [DeRue et al., 2012](#)). This reflective process enables leaders to embrace new ideas, reinforce the importance of an open-minded approach to diverse methodologies, and allow for the modification of existing routines or the creation of new practices in daily work ([Harteis, Bauer, & Gruber, 2008](#)).

Furthermore, our findings provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dimensions and advantages of practicing reflection. As noted by various authors (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005), personal reflection is a vital practice in enhancing self-awareness through accurate self-assessment of personal limitations, resources and career motivations (De Meuse, 2017). It aids in making sense of experiences and promotes individual adaptability and growth (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). In addition, building on recent research, our results support potential benefits of reflection on learning, performance, well-being and personal restoration (Bono, Glomb, Shen, Kim, & Koch, 2013; Meier, Cho, & Dumani, 2016).

Our qualitative analysis provides nuanced insights into the interplay between agile learning behaviors and resilience strategies within leaders' daily work experiences. Leaders highlighted the importance of personal resilience strategies, including adapting work routines, experimenting with new behaviors and practicing stress management to maintain performance under pressure. These findings reinforce resilience as a dynamic process influenced by individual traits and situational factors, such as open communication and collaborative problem-solving (Förster & Ducheck, 2017). Our study highlights that resilience in leadership involves more than internal coping. A supportive work environment and strong social connections are crucial for leaders to recover from adversity and mobilize resources for growth (Kuntz, Malinen, & Näswall, 2017). This relational aspect is particularly relevant, as senior leaders often feel isolated, which can weaken their resilience and recovery capabilities (Bossmann, Ditzen, & Schweitzer, 2016; Förster & Ducheck, 2017). Furthermore, the importance of social support and work-life balance suggests a broadened understanding of resilience that encompasses holistic well-being. This aligns with emerging perspectives that move beyond the conventional framing of work-life balance as a binary conflict between work and family roles, instead recognizing it as a multidimensional construct encompassing all dimensions of personal well-being (Stock, Bauer, & Bieling, 2014; Kelliher, Richardson, & Boiarintseva, 2019).

Theoretical contributions

This study advances theoretical discourse on LA by integrating mistake tolerance, error learning, reflective practice and resilience within a comprehensive framework for developing agile learning leadership. The approach emphasizes the interconnections of these concepts in fostering adaptive and effective leadership qualities. Unlike previous theoretical models that primarily focused on cognitive dimensions (DeRue et al., 2012), particularly mental quickness and intellectual flexibility, this approach broadens the understanding of the multifaceted nature of agile leadership learning. Our findings underscore the significance of motivational, behavioral and emotional dimensions in shaping leaders' agile learning strategies. Building on Lombardo & Eichinger (2000) original four-facet LA model, our results present a contemporary exploration of leaders' learning experience. We highlight several critical dimensions essential for successfully adapting to an environment defined by instability and frequent unexpected events. These dimensions include demonstrating curiosity and a willingness to engage in continuous experimentation, which pertains to the change agility facet, as well as nurturing strong social relationships and fostering personal resilience, linked to the people agility facet. This perspective aligns with recent calls to conceptualize LA as a multidimensional construct that encompasses diverse domains, including the capacity to leverage intuition and creativity in responding to new conditions, alongside metacognitive skills necessary to learn (Bennett & McWhorter, 2021; Park & Park, 2021).

Furthermore, our findings indicate that resilience in the workplace is a crucial element to consider in LA conceptualization. We emphasized how certain learning behaviors, such as embracing mistakes as opportunities for growth and being receptive to exploring alternative

perspectives and approaches, are essential resilience practices for leaders to navigate setbacks and adapt to evolving circumstances effectively. By highlighting the connection between LA and workplace resilience, this study provides valuable insights for rethinking processes and practices of agile learning from a holistic perspective, encompassing various dimensions of an individual's professional life, including personal well-being and the pursuit of purpose and meaning in everyday job responsibilities.

Practical and social implications

The findings of the present study have several implications for workplace practices and the development of agile learning leadership programs. First, the study highlights the importance of organizational strategies that enable leaders to manage complex and uncertain environments effectively. Such strategies should include normalizing errors as intrinsic to innovation and growth, maintaining a balance between accountability and psychological safety, and integrating care by fostering resilience. Learning and Development practitioners play a crucial role in promoting psychological safety environments, raising leaders' awareness and collaborating with them to gather and share internal best practices on mistake tolerance (Nicolaidis & Poell, 2020). Implementing blameless reporting systems and structured coaching programs can greatly enhance learning from failure, fostering a culture of ongoing improvement (Cannon & Edmondson, 2005).

The present study also underscores the importance of developmental work experiences in enhancing individual LA. Organizations can strategically design programs that promote internal mobility and career variety – such as job rotation, onboarding processes and transitions into new roles – to foster individual capacity and willingness to acquire knowledge from diverse experiences. This approach creates an organizational environment that encourages learning through experimentation, ensuring continual diffusion of knowledge and innovation (Dries et al., 2012; Rupčić, 2018).

Our results confirm that reflection and introspection are crucial for deep learning, problem-solving and innovation in complex environments (Faller, Lundgren, & Marsick, 2020). Interventions that facilitate self-reflection and awareness through structured practices, such as learning incidents, after-action reviews (Bell, Tannenbaum, Ford, Noe, & Kraiger, 2017) and executive coaching and mentoring (Anseel, 2017), should be considered key components of organizational practices supporting experience-based leadership learning development.

Moreover, individual and organizational strategies can influence resilience in the workplace. While standardized work-family programs enhance employee retention and productivity, they may be less effective for top executives (Wood et al., 2020). Organizations should implement tailored resilience training for leaders (Robertson, Cooper, Sarkar, & Curran, 2015) and encourage open dialogue about stress (Kaluza, Boer, Buengeler, & van Dick, 2019). Integrating well-being into daily routines – such as mental health support, wellness programs and the promotion of boundaries between work and personal life – can reinforce sustainable performance (Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014).

Strengths and limitations

The strength of this study lies in its collection of diverse perspectives from a broad range of roles and functions across Central and Eastern Europe, Italy and Egypt, reflecting significant cultural diversity. A key aspect of our research was examining how leaders interpreted their learning experiences amidst constant change and uncertainty, alongside the complexities of their socio-organizational contexts. However, the study had limitations: it focused solely on senior executives, which may have restricted the breadth of insights and required participants

to be fluent in English, potentially limiting the sample to those with international exposure or experience in multinational settings. Future research could benefit from including various managerial levels, incorporating multiple languages and increasing the representation of women leaders to explore gender differences in learning approaches. Expanding the study across different business sectors and cultures would also enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusions

This study investigated the learning experiences of leaders in their daily work, focusing on agile learning processes and strategies developed in response to uncertainty. Our findings show how these agile processes play out in leaders' work lives, highlighting components like tolerance for mistakes, openness to exploration, reflective practices and resilient strategies. Workplace learning is complex, involving interactions among individuals, teams and organizations. We emphasized the role of social support systems in shaping leaders' experiences and the importance of work-life balance for well-being and engagement. Understanding leaders' experiences is essential for enhancing discussions on LOs and leadership development in changing times. Subjective perspectives may enrich content and dimensions of existing constructs in literature. Finally, we hope this study encourages both scholars and practitioners to reassess the significance of individual experiences and the meaning-making process, integrating personal accounts to ensure learning is meaningful and aligns with individual abilities, interests, needs and contexts.

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Further reading

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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